

**Navigating Linguistic and Cultural Barriers: A Case Study of International Students  
in a Private Kazakhstani University**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
Applied Linguistics

MAQSUT NARIKBAYEV UNIVERSITY

School of Liberal Arts

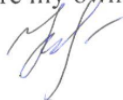
May, 2025

Word count: 18.812

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## Abstract

### **Navigating Linguistic and Cultural Barriers: A Case Study of International Students in a Private Kazakhstani University**

During the past decades, Kazakhstani universities have implemented internationalization efforts to boost academic appeal and student enrollment from abroad. The successful integration process requires systems to overcome communication barriers that international students encounter. Universities have to offer high-quality, adaptive support services to remain competitive and attractive for foreign applicants. This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore international students' experiences at a private university in Kazakhstan. The study focused on international students' experiences at a private Kazakhstani university. The research aims to identify the primary language, cultural, psychological, and environmental obstacles that prevent effective communication and adaptation. The study analyses current university support systems from the intercultural adaptation conceptual framework to determine their practices. The research data obtained through semi-structured interviews with international students and university leadership demonstrated that students encounter limited availability of academic resources in their native language and insufficient emotional support and cultural understanding from faculty and administrators. The provided support programs remain formal in nature, failing to meet the genuine requirements of students. The university's support initiatives for foreign students have been implemented, yet the research outcomes demonstrated the need for institutional changes in international student support approaches. The findings provide practical recommendations to universities seeking to enhance Kazakhstan's educational position in the region while improving international student adaptation environments.

**Keywords:** higher education, international students, communication barriers, institutional support, cross-cultural adaptation, Kazakhstan

## Аңдатпа

### Тілдік Және Мәдени Кедергілерді Еңсеру: Қазақстандағы Жекеменшік

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Соңғы онжылдықтарда қазақстандық университеттер өздерінің академиялық тартымдылығын арттыру және шетелден келетін студенттер санын арттыру мақсатында интернационалдандыруға күш салды. Сәтті интеграция процесі үшін халықаралық студенттер кездесетін коммуникациялық кедергілерді жеңетін жүйелер қажет. Университеттер халықаралық үміткерлер үшін бәсекеге қабілетті және тартымды болып қалу үшін жоғары сапалы, жауапты қолдау қызметтерін ұсынуы керек. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы жеке университеттегі халықаралық студенттердің тәжірибесін зерттеудің сапалы әдісін пайдаланды. Зерттеу Қазақстандағы жекеменшік университеттегі шетелдік студенттердің тәжірибесіне арналды. Зерттеудің мақсаты – тиімді қарым-қатынас пен бейімделуге кедергі келтіретін негізгі тілдік, мәдени, психологиялық және экологиялық кедергілерді анықтау. Зерттеу жұмыс тәжірибесін анықтау мақсатында мәдениетаралық бейімделудің тұжырымдамалық негіздері тұрғысынан университетті қолдаудың қолданыстағы жүйелеріне талдау жасайды. Шетелдік студенттермен және университет әкімшілерімен жартылай құрылымдық сұхбаттар арқылы алынған зерттеу деректері студенттердің ана тілінде академиялық ресурстардың шектеулі қолжетімділігін және оқытушылар мен әкімшілер тарапынан эмоционалдық қолдау мен мәдени түсінігінің жеткіліксіздігін бастан кешірді. Ұсынылатын қолдау бағдарламалары формальды сипатқа ие және студенттердің нақты қажеттіліктерін қанағаттандырмайды. Университет халықаралық студенттерді қолдау бойынша бастамаларды жүзеге асырды, бірақ зерттеу нәтижелері халықаралық студенттерді қолдау тәсілдеріне институционалдық өзгерістер енгізу қажеттілігін көрсетеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері Қазақстанның өңірдегі білім беру позициясын нығайтуға

және шетелдік студенттердің бейімделу жағдайларын жақсартуға ұмтылатын университеттерге практикалық ұсыныстарды қамтиды.

**Негізгі сөздер:** жоғары білім, шетелдік студенттер, коммуникациялық кедергілер, институционалдық қолдау, мәдениетаралық бейімделу, Қазақстан

## Аннотация

### **Преодоление Языковых и Культурных Барьеров: Кейс-исследование Иностранных Студентов в Частном Университете Казахстана**

В течение последних десятилетий Казахстанские университеты предпринимали усилия по интернационализации, чтобы повысить академическую привлекательность и увеличить количество студентов из-за рубежа. Для успешного процесса интеграции необходимы системы, позволяющие преодолевать коммуникационные барьеры, с которыми сталкиваются иностранные студенты. Университеты должны предлагать высококачественные, адаптивные услуги поддержки, чтобы оставаться конкурентоспособными и привлекательными для иностранных абитуриентов. В данном исследовании использовался качественный метод изучения опыта иностранных студентов в частном университете в Казахстане. Исследование было сосредоточено на опыте иностранных студентов в частном Казахстанском университете. Цель исследования - выявить основные языковые, культурные, психологические и экологические препятствия, которые мешают эффективной коммуникации и адаптации. В исследовании анализируются существующие системы поддержки университета с точки зрения концептуальных основ межкультурной адаптации, чтобы определить их практику. Данные исследования, полученные в ходе полуструктурированных интервью с иностранными студентами и руководством университетов, показали, что студенты сталкиваются с ограниченной доступностью академических ресурсов на родном языке и недостаточной эмоциональной поддержкой и культурным пониманием со стороны преподавателей и администраторов. Предоставляемые программы поддержки носят формальный характер и не отвечают реальным потребностям студентов. В университете были реализованы инициативы по поддержке иностранных студентов, однако результаты исследования

продемонстрировали необходимость институциональных изменений в подходах к поддержке иностранных студентов. Результаты исследования содержат практические рекомендации для университетов, стремящихся укрепить образовательные позиции Казахстана в регионе и улучшить условия адаптации иностранных студентов.

**Ключевые слова:** высшее образование, иностранные студенты, коммуникационные барьеры, институциональная поддержка, кросс-культурная адаптация, Казахстан.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Globalization has influenced the quality of education in many developing countries, and Kazakhstan is no exception to this trend. Cultural pluralism, as the foundation of globalization, positively affects international and local students' cultural and knowledge exchange experiences. It is a cause of Kazakhstan's increasing academic rank and economic status worldwide; therefore, strategies to assist foreign students are crucial. Accordingly, this study analyzes the support measures of one private Kazakhstani university and identifies the communication challenges international students face to determine best practices. This chapter will outline the research background, define the problem, state the purpose, and introduce the research questions and significance of the study.

### **Background Information**

In the 21st century, higher education has undergone substantial transformation due to globalization, technological change, and regional integration processes. One of the most important developments shaping academic systems, particularly in Europe and Central Asia, has been the rise of academic mobility and internationalization, which are now viewed as key indicators of university competitiveness and national educational progress (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2004). Academic mobility, defined broadly as the movement of students, faculty, and researchers across national borders, has become a strategic goal for many countries and institutions striving for international relevance.

Kazakhstan remained under the influence of the Soviet educational legacy for a significant period following its independence. However, recent decades have marked a shift, with education becoming a strategic priority for national development (Shamshidinova et al., 2023). This prioritization has led to several reforms aimed at modernizing the education system and aligning it with international standards. For instance, various programs targeting local and international students have been introduced to strengthen global engagement.

The government of Kazakhstan adopted the Bologna Process through its Declaration signing in March 2010 to join the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as its 47th member (MoES, 2011). The alignment of strategic European educational standards significantly changed Kazakhstan's higher education system. The Bologna Process works to establish a unified European Higher Education Area by implementing three-degree cycles (Bachelor's–Master's–Doctorate) and adopting the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), diploma supplements, and promoting academic mobility (Reichert & Tauch, 2005).

The Bologna principles received national backing through Kazakhstan's strategic plans. The “Kazakhstan 2050” initiative, which started in 2012, presents a knowledge-based society vision focusing on innovation, human capital development, and global integration (Nazarbayev, 2012). The framework required higher education institutions to develop internationally competitive graduates and researchers. The EHEA alignment was designed to create diploma comparability between Kazakhstani and European institutions, leading to better qualification recognition and academic mobility opportunities.

The Bologna Process participation rationale for countries includes student mobility improvement and quality enhancement through benchmarking standards, according to Altbach and de Wit (2018). The ambition in Kazakhstan has resulted in rising numbers of students who both leave and enter the country for educational purposes. Kazakhstani student programs have traditionally focused on sending students abroad through the Bolashak. However, recent years have brought growing interest in attracting international students to study within Kazakhstan.

The academic mobility program promotes international exchange, develops students' language abilities and academic skills, and fosters cross-cultural understanding (Dias et al., 2020). Students benefit from exposure to diverse educational environments and teaching

methodologies through mobility, which contributes to developing more flexible and inclusive pedagogical approaches. However, research has also shown that the diversity of language, culture, and mindset can pose significant adaptation challenges for international students, potentially impacting their academic success and psychological well-being (Hussain et al., 2021).

The main result of such policy is that in the academic year of 2022-2023, more than 14,200 international students were enrolled in Kazakhstani higher education institutions, representing a notable increase from previous years (MoES, 2023). These students come from over 50 countries, with the majority arriving from Uzbekistan (56.3%), Turkmenistan (17.4%), China (6.9%), Kyrgyzstan (4.8%), and Russia (3.2%) (WES, 2023). There is also a growing number of students from Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Turkey. Approximately 70% of international students are enrolled in undergraduate programs, 20% in master's programs, and 10% in PhD programs. However, despite the overall growth of international enrollment, some reports indicate a recent decline in specific mobility programs or institutions. According to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023), international students in specific categories dropped from 1,971 in 2021 to 879 in 2023. This trend reflects growing regional competition, including the emergence of foreign university branches in other CIS countries.

Kazakhstan has actively embraced internationalization as a national priority. There are growing signs that the country could emerge as a regional hub for international students soon. First, its geographic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia provides a strategic advantage for international mobility. The transcontinental positioning enables students from East and West to benefit from cultural, linguistic and logistical accessibility. According to Hwami (2024), such a geographical advantage, regional diplomacy, and infrastructure make

Kazakhstan a bridge for international academic exchange, especially for students from South Asia, the Middle East, and neighboring CIS countries.

Second, Kazakhstan offers affordable tuition fees and a higher cost of living than traditional Western destinations. For many international students, especially those from lower- and middle-income countries, the financial feasibility of studying in Kazakhstan is a compelling advantage. According to a 2023 World Education Services (WES) report, Kazakhstan's average annual tuition fee remains 3–4 times lower than in the UK or USA, while providing comparable quality in accredited institutions.

Third, expanding English-taught programs has broadened access to higher education for international students. More than 60 higher education institutions now offer fully or partially English-medium instruction, particularly in engineering, medicine, business, and international relations. This trend reduces language barriers and increases Kazakhstan's visibility in global education markets (Akkari et al., 2023).

Moreover, Kazakhstan's higher education policies increasingly support international student inclusion. The government has introduced academic grants, simplified visa procedures, and provided opportunities for post-study employment for international graduates (citation of the documents). That would be better to add statistics with money and number of grants. These measures signal a systemic effort to attract students and support their transition and retention in the Kazakhstani labor market. As highlighted by Castro et al. (2016), such holistic frameworks are essential to sustain internationalization beyond recruitment.

Additionally, the diversification of academic programs and growing emphasis on digital transformation in education strengthen Kazakhstan's appeal, with new partnerships with international universities and companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Coursera. Huawei and Binance have introduced programs in artificial intelligence, blockchain technologies, and digital marketing. These innovations align Kazakhstan's educational

offerings with emerging global trends, attracting forward-looking international students (GMIPost, 2024).

The following factors determine Kazakhstan as the platform for higher education: linguistic familiarity, cultural proximity, and cost-effectiveness (Hwami, 2024). Russian remains the common language of communication for numerous post-Soviet nations, which makes it easier for international students to adapt to academic life. The strategic position of Kazakhstan between Europe and Asia and its expanding English-language programs have made the country more attractive to students (Kaikenov et al., 2024; Akkari et al., 2023).

Private universities are essential elements that make Kazakhstan more attractive to international students. They provide state universities with more adaptable enrollment systems, reduced class enrollments, and specialized support programs for students from outside Kazakhstan. These universities have made international accreditation and foreign institution partnerships core elements of their development plans, which enhances their international standing (Castro et al., 2016).

The country maintains sociopolitical stability through its active membership in global and regional organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and UNESCO initiatives, which creates a reputation for being a secure and progressive study abroad destination. The emerging trends indicate that Kazakhstan has a strong potential to attract more international students from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The country stands ready to lead regional academic mobility and global education cooperation through its ongoing reforms and institutional capacity development.

The internationalization process has brought multiple obstacles into the system. The Bologna Process formal structures adopted by Kazakhstan do not translate into uniform practical implementation between different institutions. Mambetova and Karatay (2022) show that numerous universities face problems because their faculty members lack preparedness,

while ECTS usage remains inconsistent, and institutions fail to provide adequate support for international students. The gaps in student support services become most apparent when international students face linguistic, cultural, bureaucratic, and social challenges during their studies.

Language acquisition remains a central challenge. Most universities in Kazakhstan teach their programs through Russian and Kazakh, while English is a secondary language. Students lacking proficiency in Russian and Kazakh are challenged when accessing course materials and administrative systems and connecting with local students (Akkari et al., 2023; Kaikenov et al, 2024). The availability of language preparatory courses at universities remains inconsistent because they do not meet the academic requirements of students.

The international student experience becomes complicated because of cultural differences and social integration issues. The cultural dimensions theory developed by Hofstede (2001) helps explain why students and faculty members have different expectations about classroom participation, communication styles, and hierarchy. Students from collectivist or high-context cultural backgrounds experience difficulties adapting to individualistic or direct academic settings (Marginson, 2014). Students who do not receive proper intercultural training or mentoring programs face challenges when they attempt to participate fully in academic and extracurricular activities.

Kazakhstan maintains internationalization as a fundamental national strategy, despite existing obstacles. The Concept of Science and Higher Education development (2022-2029) sets particular targets to boost international student enrollment while improving the worldwide recognition of Kazakhstani universities (MoES, 2020). The government supports these goals by establishing educational grants for foreign nationals, creating centralized admissions portals in multiple languages, and promoting institutions to establish International

Offices with dedicated staff (Kuzhabekova & Amankulova, 2024; Hwami & Makoelle, 2024).

Kazakhstan's integration demonstrates its desire to establish itself as a regional educational center while actively participating in worldwide academic networks. The country has successfully implemented European standards in its structures and attracted international students, while providing competitive academic programs. The actual experiences of these students receive insufficient research attention, particularly regarding their communication and cultural obstacles during their studies.

The research investigates international students at a Kazakhstani university in central Kazakhstan to analyze how language and cultural differences impact their academic and social adjustment. The research provides insights into local policy development while advancing theoretical knowledge about international student mobility and institutional adaptation.

### **Problem Statement**

This research aims to determine the impact of language and cultural differences on academic results, social interactions, and the emotional state of international students in Kazakhstan. The internationalization of higher education keeps growing worldwide while Kazakhstan has made efforts to modernize its higher education system. The Bologna Process membership and English language program expansion and foreign student admission process simplification represent key reforms in Kazakhstan (Kaikenov et al., 2024).

Kazakhstan has become more appealing to international students through its efforts, attracting students from Central Asia and neighboring areas. Students choose Kazakhstan because of its affordable tuition rates, convenient location, cultural ties, and government assistance (Akkari et al., 2023; WES, 2023). Improvements do not solve every existing challenge.

Some Kazakhstani studies show that international students still face serious communication challenges. For example, Mordvintseva and Antonov (2024) surveyed international students of three Kazakhstani universities, and the results revealed that the challenges students face are related to language barrier, psychological stress, absence of cultural understanding, and university support. Specifically, international students reported difficulties preparing for lessons, understanding lectures, and communicating with peers. Another study found that successful social adaptation requires psychological and socio-cultural adjustment; few universities provide targeted programs (Biekenov & Nogaybayev, 2012). These studies confirm that despite efforts toward internationalization; Kazakhstani universities do not yet ensure a systematic approach to adaptation.

Research indicates that students who lack familiarity with local language, classroom expectations, and cultural norms face difficulties when fully participating in academic and social environments (Hofstede, 2001; Marginson, 2014). The challenges students face result in stress, low motivation, and feelings of isolation. Students sometimes face reduced academic achievement and social withdrawal because of these difficulties (Kapur, 2018; Hussain et al., 2021). Sanbaeva and Esenova (2024) reveal that international students encounter psychological problems alongside social problems, linguistic problems, communicative problems, and housing problems.

The recent enrollment numbers for academic mobility programs have experienced a significant decrease. The total number of international students in Kazakhstan remains high, but specific enrollment categories dropped from 1,971 in 2021 to 879 in 2023, resulting in a 50% plus decrease (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2023). The increase in foreign universities near Kazakhstan is a probable cause because these institutions provide superior support systems and environments that students find more comfortable. The decreasing student enrollment numbers indicate that Kazakhstan faces challenges in retaining

international students due to communication and cultural obstacles (Hwami & Makoelle, 2024).

Universities in Kazakhstan need to enhance their understanding of international student challenges to maintain their position as a popular international education destination. This research investigates the impact of language barriers and cultural differences on student experiences and strategies for institutions to enhance their support services. By listening to the voices of international students, this research will offer practical insights to help make academic mobility more inclusive and prosperous in Kazakhstani higher education.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to explore international students' experiences during their study in a private Kazakhstani university, based on the barriers they face in learning and social life. At the same time, it aims to identify challenges, institutional strategies and approaches, and best practices that help international students overcome.

### **Research Question**

To reach the purpose of the study, the following research questions were developed:

- How do international students experience and navigate language, cultural, psychological, and environmental communication challenges in academic and everyday contexts?
- What support mechanisms and institutional strategies does a private university provide to help international students overcome communication barriers?
- How do students perceive the effectiveness of these support strategies in addressing communication challenges and enhancing their adaptation?

### **Significance of the study**

This study directly responds to the needs of a private university in Kazakhstan that is actively seeking to strengthen its international profile and improve the experiences of its international students. As part of its strategic plan to attract and retain a diverse student population, the university faces the challenge of supporting students from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The findings of this research will assist university leadership, including the provost, international office representatives, deans, and program coordinators in identifying gaps in current support structures, fostering a more inclusive academic environment, and increasing student satisfaction and retention. The study also provides evidence-based recommendations to inform internal policies and staff development strategies, ensuring that internationalization efforts are meaningful and sustainable at the institutional level.

At the same time, the results of this study are of interest to educational program coordinators and teachers involved in teaching international students. The presented findings can be used to adjust course content, improve teachers' intercultural competence, and promote an effective educational environment.

The study based on Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity contributes to worldwide discussions about intercultural competence and communication and psychological well-being in Kazakhstani higher education (Gahwal et al., 2021; Abramova & Kapustina, 2022). The research reveals how language and cultural distance influence students' identity formation and academic commitment and participation in Kazakhstan.

The research results create immediate policy implications for Kazakhstan. The research offers recommendations to improve international student services while meeting global standards. The development of institutional support systems will enhance international

students' experiences while boosting retention rates, enhancing Kazakhstan's position in the global education market (Knight, 2004; Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). This research thus supports national goals for internationalization by informing policies that attract and sustain diverse student populations in the long term.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter analyzes existing literature on international students' cultural and language adaptation process. The literature review aims to identify and systematize key scientific approaches and conceptual frameworks related to communication barriers and their influence on the academic and social adaptation process. The chapter consists of five parts. The first section describes key concepts of communication barriers and consequences for students' well-being. The second part analyzes the impact of communication challenges on students' academic achievement. In the third section, support systems available to international students within the framework of Kazakhstan are described. The fourth section includes literature-based recommendations for solving the communication barriers. Finally, the last part shows the main theories employed for this research and their interrelationship.

Student exchange and international study programs have become critical instruments for gaining knowledge in higher education, promoting cultural exchange, and collaborative study. A study conducted by Maratova et al. (2019) points out that “incoming student mobility in Kazakhstan is less developed compared to nearby countries, with a limited range of university services and infrastructure, few universities able to provide education in English, weak material and technical resources among Kazakhstani universities, and visa limitations” (p. 10). On the other hand, despite the efforts of Kazakhstani universities to reach the top ranking, the communication challenges mentioned remain a boundary. As a student at a foreign school, I experienced international students' challenges. Hence, I have a solid desire to research this topic. Addressing this issue is important; therefore, this review will focus on four major types of communication barriers: language, cultural, psychological, and environmental. This research aims to determine how universities can be used to avoid communication barriers among international students in local communities. It focuses on comprehending the nature of communication barriers.

## **Defining Communication Barriers**

The definition of communication may seem obvious to many; however, various fields apply it differently and for different purposes. Communication is sending messages from one person to another and involves the exchange and interaction of meaning (Boni, 2016). Hasson (2019), author and educator, stated that human interests influence communication, and this process can go wrong, leading to misunderstandings. Nevertheless, it can be developed and improved (p.18). Both statements describe the purpose and process of communication in detail. However, Floyd et al. (2022) explain this term as a continuing process that relies on symbols, such as words and gestures, to convey information (p.4). Moreover, human relationships are formed through intentional and unintentional messages. According to the data, communication is important in academic settings, too. In particular, the relationships between international students and their professors and peers can lead to successful or unsuccessful understanding. This depends on how international students overcome language, cultural, psychological, and environmental barriers that may appear during their studies (Figure 1). As Hasson (2019) mentioned, if the interaction process between students and professors or others fails, it may lead to misunderstandings and negative consequences, such as decreased academic performance or motivation to study.

### ***Language Barrier***

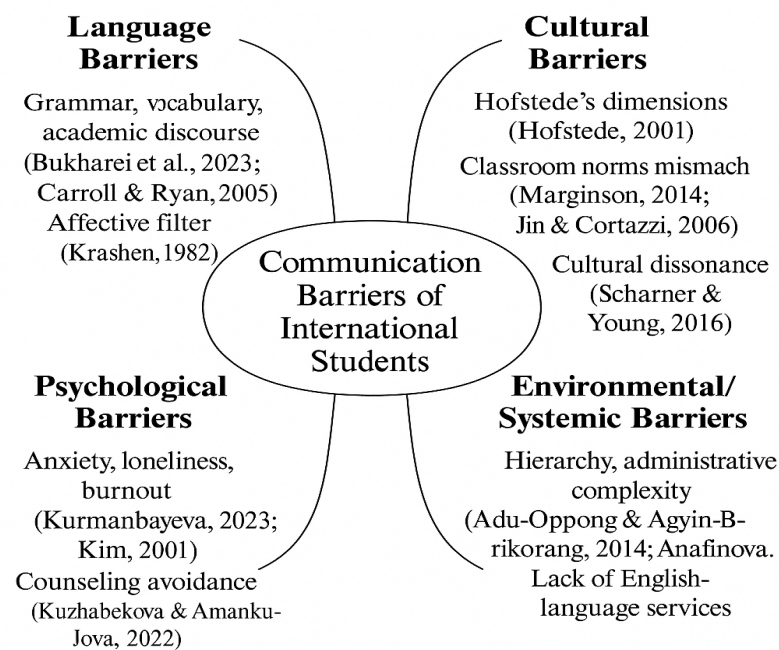
Language is a crucial tool for communication, as people can interpret their thoughts easily. However, linguistic diversity creates a language barrier that influences the acquisition of another language. Few sources dive into the exact definition of the language barrier since it can be pronounced. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2023), a language barrier is “a difficulty for people communicating because they speak different languages.” Even if the concept of the language barrier is obvious, the causes of this barrier can be limited

knowledge of specialized terminology, the use of jargon and slang, and low language proficiency.

Mukhamejanova and Konurbayeva (2023) found that the biggest challenge faced by returning students was the language barrier. In addition, Panocová (2020) confirmed that the language barrier is a crucial factor that affects participants' social lives (p.89). Kazakhstan is a bilingual country; nevertheless, international students often need to learn Russian and Kazakh to communicate effectively in academic and everyday situations. I believe that learning two languages may contribute to the language barrier and increase the cultural barrier.

### Figure 1

*Literature map by barriers*



### **Cultural Barrier**

Cultural barriers commonly exist among international people, as each nationality has a unique culture. The concept of culture can be interpreted differently depending on the

person. Traditions and understanding of another nation can pose challenges to communication. Some aspects of culture may cause difficulties in language learning, which are called “cultural barriers”. Mirdehghan et al. (2011) stated that “Cultural barriers are considered as those traditions that become hurdles in the path of understanding or teaching/learning completely different languages, among which body language, religious beliefs, etiquette, and social habits are noteworthy” (p. 15). Therefore, cultural differences include diversity in food, traditions, social norms, and religious beliefs.

Scholars who studied the cultural differences between Sudanese and Chinese students at the University of Khartoum found that comprehension of the new culture is limited to a cognitive degree, leaving them unprepared for unexpected real-life scenarios (Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, similar situations can be expected with international students in Kazakhstan. Kazakh culture has many similarities with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, which may make adaptation easier for those students in the local community. However, as seen in the cases of China and Sudan, students from more distinct countries will likely face cultural challenges.

### ***Psychological Barrier***

Psychological barriers can be defined as obstacles created by people’s minds and thoughts, which may prevent effective communication. Muhibbin Shah (2001) stated, “Psychology is a science that studies open behavior and is closed to humans both as individuals and groups, concerning the environment” (p.205). Another study that explored psychological factors that influence students’ acquisition of a new language indicated four reasons: attitude, anxiety, aptitude, and motivation (Budianto, 2011). These factors may be relevant for international students in Kazakhstan. Experiencing language and cultural barriers, students may feel anxiety, and their motivation and attitude toward learning Kazakh

and Russian depend on their personal goals. Understanding these psychological barriers prevents international students from facing significant challenges.

### ***Environmental Barrier***

Unlike other communication barriers, environmental barriers are not caused by human actions. Many ecological factors negatively affect communication. In their research, Adu-Oppong and Agyin-Birikorang (2014) define several facts that can cause misunderstandings in communication: time, status relationships, and the use of specific terminology unfamiliar to the receiver (p.210). As a result, the manifestation of environmental barriers depends on the environment and external factors.

Lack of time does not allow the sender to fully formulate and structure the message, and the recipient to decipher it adequately. Listeners mostly “hear but do not listen” during lectures and conferences because of overload or the large amount of incoming information. Authors mention that listening is an active process that includes physical, emotional, and intellectual presence (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). Therefore, improving listening conditions and fostering active engagement are essential for meaningful academic communication and mutual understanding between lecturers and international students.

Another factor that may influence the well-being of international students is the organization’s hierarchical structure. If professors are perceived as a figure of authority, students feel pressure and fear asking for help. As a result, the study of Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang (2014) highlights that environmental barriers are affected by external factors, such as organizational culture and the language of communication. This suggests that fostering a more inclusive and approachable academic environment, where hierarchical barriers are reduced and open communication is encouraged, can significantly enhance international students’ well-being and academic engagement.

## **Communication Challenges Faced by International Students**

International students face multiple communication barriers that impact their academic, social, and psychological adaptation. These difficulties encompass linguistic, cultural, and systemic aspects, making it challenging to integrate into new academic environments (Alatas & Sayimer, 2025). Communication problems not only hinder academic achievement but also affect students' emotional well-being and the formation of social networks. Therefore, addressing these barriers is critical to ensuring the success and satisfaction of international students both globally and in Kazakhstan.

### ***International Context***

Globally, international students point to language barriers as one of the most critical challenges in cross-cultural communication. For example, in Turkey, international students often face difficulties due to limited knowledge of the Turkish language and a lack of support in English (Alatas & Sayimer, 2025). Students who lack proper language skills experience academic difficulties while also becoming socially isolated and develop psychological stress because they cannot fully engage in academic and social events (Alatas & Sayimer, 2025). Language stands alongside cultural differences as a major obstacle for students. According to Alatas and Sayimer (2025), students face “culture shock” because they encounter substantial differences between host country norms and values and their home country expectations. Students experience frustration and marginalization because they misunderstand academic communication styles and expectations for class participation and non-verbal norms (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). The sociocultural environment creates significant effects on how people adapt. According to Alatas and Sayimer (2025), UNESCO reported that cultural misunderstandings, prejudices, and stereotyping make international students feel like outsiders. The students from African and Arab backgrounds in Turkey encounter racial bias

and microaggressions from the local population. The absence of organized intercultural training programs for students and teachers worsens these problems.

Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus (2016) demonstrate that students need both institutional backing and their own strength to achieve successful adaptation. The psychological barriers that result from communication obstacles play a significant role in this process. The research literature frequently examines three common psychological challenges: fear of negative evaluation, speech errors, and homesickness (Kim, 2001). The emotional barriers match Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) because stress and anxiety normally block language learning and adaptation. The administrative complexities, along with unclear procedures and limited English service availability, form systemic communication barriers according to Alatas and Sayimer (2025). Students face challenges when using university systems because the institutions lack multilingual support and their departments have poor coordination. This means that communication challenges in the international context are not limited to language barriers alone; they are intertwined with cultural, psychological, and institutional factors. A comprehensive and inclusive approach is needed to overcome them.

### ***Kazakhstani Context***

The adaptation challenges of international students in Kazakhstan reflect many global trends, but their unique characteristics are shaped by the country's socio-cultural and educational environment. As Kaikenov et al. (2024) noted, Kazakhstan's efforts to internationalize higher education have attracted more international students. However, the local context poses specific communication challenges. Language remains a significant barrier. Although some universities offer programs in English, the main languages of instruction and administrative communication remain Kazakh and Russian. This creates difficulties for students who do not speak Russian. According to Kaikenov et al. (2024), many students report problems understanding course materials and interacting with

administrative staff. Furthermore, despite official documents such as the Academic Policy, which provide information in English, many important resources are only available in Kazakh or Russian (Kaikenov et al., 2024). This gap between policy and practice creates additional difficulties.

Cultural adaptation is also a significant challenge. The academic environment in Kazakhstan presents students with difficulties when they need to adjust between Soviet-based educational systems and Western educational reforms (Anafinova, 2024). Hierarchical classroom behavior patterns, formal communication styles, and expectations of deference to authority may cause misunderstandings among students from more democratic educational systems. As Kaikenov et al. (2024) noted, the lack of integration programs between local and international students limits opportunities for genuine intercultural interaction. Students often perceive organized activities as superficial and do not facilitate deep cultural exchange.

Psychological difficulties are closely related to communication barriers. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and marginalization are especially acute during the initial period of students' stay (Kaikenov et al., 2024). The limited capabilities of university counseling services stem from insufficient staff members who speak multiple languages and understand cultural differences. Western reforms face obstacles in Kazakhstan because it maintains centralized governance, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited institutional autonomy, which makes effective communication and adaptation difficult (Anafinova, 2024).

Despite their challenges, students use various informal methods to adjust to their new environment. Students build support networks, learn independently through online materials, and show remarkable personal strength (Kaikenov et al., 2024). The current efforts demonstrate that official institutional support systems fail to meet student needs adequately. The main challenges in Kazakhstan differ from those in Turkey because they focus on

language barriers, bureaucratic obstacles, and cultural mismatches. The two educational settings demonstrate the need for active student support measures.

Kazakhstan has to expand English service availability, enhance faculty and staff intercultural competence, and establish an inclusive academic and social environment to improve the situation. Student feedback integration into support program design will enhance their effectiveness and alignment with actual student requirements.

## **Effects of Communication Barrier**

### ***Academic Performance***

Language and cultural barriers impact both the academic results of international students and their formation of academic self-identity. The scientific literature demonstrates that communication obstacles are directly linked to the emotional responses students experience, which affect their feelings of academic belonging and active engagement with academic activities.

Bukhari et al. (2023) applied ethnographic methods through observation combined with semi-structured interviews to examine communication barriers affecting international students. Students who possess limited grammar abilities and pronunciation difficulties, together with anxiety and poor self-confidence, face challenges in both academic and social situations. The study provides deep qualitative findings about student experiences through lived experiences, yet its results are constrained by both small participant numbers and the typical subjectivity that occurs in ethnographic data analysis.

The research by Hussain, Muhammad, and Yasin (2021) used a 25-item questionnaire to perform a quantitative survey, which revealed that students struggle academically because of language deficiencies, poor teaching methods, negative teacher attitudes, and physical hearing problems. Their research shows greater structure yet lacks the depth that could have been achieved through integrating qualitative data. Both research findings support the

conclusion that communication barriers from linguistic, psychological, or environmental origins act as direct obstacles to academic advancement and social adjustment.

Students' academic self-concept directly relates to their language proficiency levels beyond their academic grades. Students with restricted language abilities, according to Carroll and Ryan (2005), develop feelings of academic inferiority even though they demonstrate excellent content understanding. The inability to communicate sophisticated ideas during seminars results in student marginalization, which reduces their confidence levels while creating feelings of being an outsider within academic communities. Academic success requires students to master specialized language norms according to Swales' (1990) concept of "discourse communities." Students who cannot match disciplinary conventions experience alienation from core academic dialogue which weakens their academic identity and engagement.

Student performance in classroom communication receives essential direction from cultural expectations regarding classroom interaction. According to Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, collectivist and high-power distance cultural students tend to see active classroom participation as disrespectful, while Western educational settings demand debate through verbal engagement. Marginson (2014) shows that students develop internalized feelings of inadequacy and failure because of cultural differences between their educational background and the requirements of Western academic systems, even though they possess intellectual strengths. According to Jin and Cortazzi (2006), students from academic backgrounds that value respectful silence experience Western critique-based learning environments as frightening and isolated spaces. Cultural dissonance strips students of their ability to express themselves while creating a situation where they withdraw from academic activities and lose confidence.

Academic identity development depends heavily on feedback mechanisms. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), students experience damaged self-efficacy because they misinterpret feedback due to language barriers. Students who fail to understand linguistic details may interpret helpful feedback as hostile or humiliating, which leads them to avoid academic risks. Students will develop decreased academic ambition and altered self-perceived competence through repeated experiences with misunderstood or demotivating feedback.

International students experience communication barriers that affect their academic performance and classroom participation, as well as their emotional resilience and academic identity development. Mastering vocabulary and grammar only represent a basic requirement for effective academic communication because it demands complete cultural and emotional adaptation. Students face academic underperformance, identity conflict, and reduced career prospects when institutions fail to provide adequate language support and intercultural sensitivity.

The research demonstrates that universities need to establish language support programs, culturally responsive teaching methods, and faculty training for intercultural communication and psychological safety measures that value diverse communication styles.

### ***Psychological well-being***

The emotional state and psychological health of international students suffer significantly because of language barriers. Research evidence demonstrates that communication obstacles lead to increased mental health problems and create barriers to social integration and prolong the time needed for adjustment (Baizhumanova, 2023; Krashen, 1982; Kurmanbayeva, 2023; Kuzhabekova & Amankulova, 2022; Schartner & Young, 2016)

The research conducted by Kurmanbayeva (2023) and Baizhumanova (2023) reveals that students with limited language abilities tend to experience elevated depression symptoms, anxiety levels, and feelings of loneliness. Students face communication difficulties, which prevent them from grasping academic material and building genuine relationships, thus resulting in social isolation. The experience of isolation creates a self-reinforcing pattern where emotional distress makes language practice and conversation more difficult, increasing feelings of exclusion (Kurmanbayeva, 2023).

The observed pattern confirms the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982) which states that anxiety together with low self-confidence and motivation act as barriers to effective language learning. Students who avoid speaking because of fear of making mistakes will not practice or participate, thus their adaptation process will become even longer.

The emotional difficulties become more complex because of cultural differences between students. Schartner and Young (2016) explain that cultural dissonance refers to the mental tension people experience when encountering unfamiliar cultural standards. Students frequently experience tension between their original culture and their new environment. Anafinova (2024) stated that the academic community shows resistance to Western-style practices because Soviet academic norms continue to influence the academic environment and create discomfort when students and faculty adopt more egalitarian relationships. The cultural differences between students and faculty members result in identity conflicts, negatively affecting students' mental health and making their academic and social transition more difficult (Marginson, 2014).

The absence of adequate support services enables academic burnout to develop among students. According to Sarsembayeva (2021), students who encounter extended language and cultural challenges develop emotional exhaustion and chronic fatigue and start

withdrawing from academic and social activities. Students from international backgrounds avoid counseling services because their home countries maintain mental health stigma, according to Kuzhabekova and Amankulova (2022).

International students at Kazakhstani universities experience loneliness, language barriers, and cultural misunderstandings according to Kaikenov and colleagues (2024). The psychological counseling centers at universities face ongoing problems because their counselors lack fluent English skills, and students remain unaware of how mental health support functions in Kazakhstan. Students frequently fail to obtain the necessary assistance. Universities must understand the emotional aspects of adaptation by developing complete support systems that address academic requirements and psychological well-being.

### ***Professional aspiration***

Acquiring practical communication skills is essential for achieving professional success, especially in modern labor markets that have become more globalized. Multiple studies demonstrate that workers need professional knowledge, strong communication abilities, and cultural competence for employer preference (Gribble, 2008; Arthur & Flynn, 2011). International students who face communication barriers because of their language skills and cultural background tend to face significant challenges when they move from studying to working.

The authors of Arthur and Flynn (2011) revealed that students with limited language abilities cannot reach important career opportunities, which include internships, research assistant positions, and professional networking events. Students develop lower self-confidence and adopt negative views about their employability potential when their academic qualifications match domestic graduates despite this limited confidence. Students' self-esteem, career expectations, and future integration into the labor market depend on communication competency.

Bourdieu (1986) established cultural capital as an important framework for studying these research phenomena. Bourdieu established that people without access to the dominant language and cultural patterns of society face ongoing disadvantages when entering elite professional areas. Sherry, along with Thomas and Chui (2010), demonstrated through research that many international students succeed academically yet face an “invisible ceiling” that limits their career progression through underemployment and lower starting salaries relative to domestic students (p. 154). Social exclusion functions through communication barriers that create both technical and social barriers.

The effects of these challenges persist after the initial job search period and affect future professional developments. Research by Gribble (2008) demonstrated that international graduates dealing with ongoing language and cultural difficulties tend to decrease their career ambitions or stop pursuing professional positions in the host nation. Career change demonstrates personal decisions and the continuous effects of systematic obstacles students encounter when they start their careers.

The current situation in Kazakhstan follows the worldwide trends. The research by Kaikeno et al. (2024) indicates that international graduates from mobility programs choose not to stay in Kazakhstan after graduation primarily because they struggle with professional communication norms and unfamiliarity with workplace cultural expectations and exclusion from informal professional networks. The national labor market fails to achieve full graduate participation because unresolved communication barriers exist despite governmental initiatives to internationalize higher education and attract global talent.

International students encounter communication barriers that affect their academic success, professional growth, psychological state, and future career development. Host countries such as Kazakhstan should establish specific support programs with professional

language training, cultural mentorship, and structured integration to boost international graduate employability and retention.

### **Methods Applied in International Universities**

The growing number of international students during the past twenty years has forced host universities to develop extensive support systems to meet their needs. The international experience of the USA, the UK, the Middle East, and Asia reveals different approaches to supporting international students during their transition. For example, institutions in the United Kingdom emphasize early intervention through pre-sessional English programs, mentoring initiatives, and academic writing centers. Brooks and Waters (2021) show that students participating in these early programs demonstrate stronger academic outcomes and greater confidence during their studies. Ammigan et al. (2021) further highlight the effectiveness of structured peer mentoring in promoting social connectedness and academic engagement, thus reducing feelings of isolation.

In the United States, universities have developed one of the most comprehensive support models, integrating academic, psychological, and administrative services. International student offices play a central role, offering orientation sessions, visa guidance, academic skill workshops, and networking events (Le & Gardner, 2021). A distinctive innovation in the US system is the embedded culturally sensitive counseling services within international student support units (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). These initiatives address language anxiety and cultural shock and also provide accessible, stigma-free psychological support. Importantly, career development programs tailored for international students bridge the gap between education and employment, helping students navigate visa restrictions and workplace expectations (Le & Gardner, 2021).

Germany, in contrast, focuses strongly on affordability and peer-based integration. The combination of free or low-cost tuition and structured buddy programs provides

international students with practical and social support mechanisms (Finger & de Wit, 2022). Studienkolleg programs prepare students linguistically and academically for German university education. However, scholars note that limited English-language services at many institutions still pose barriers for students lacking high-level German proficiency.

Canada has similarly built an inclusive environment centered on multiculturalism and long-term settlement opportunities. According to Yu and Wright (2021), universities provide mental health support tailored to cultural adjustment, international career workshops, and assistance with immigration pathways. These services enhance students' sense of belonging and contribute to Canada's strong reputation as a destination for permanent migration after graduation.

Several Asian countries have developed robust systems combining language training with social integration efforts. In South Korea, mandatory Korean language courses and structured peer tutoring programs form the backbone of adaptation efforts (Lee & Schoole, 2020). Universities also organize cultural festivals and campus activities, encouraging local and international students to interact socially (Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023). While these initiatives have successfully promoted community engagement, students who struggle with Korean language acquisition still face significant academic challenges.

Additionally, Chinese universities have institutionalized international student support through comprehensive services offered by International Offices. Students are often required to take Chinese language courses, and mentorship programs involving local students facilitate cultural and academic adjustment (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2021; Zhu, Wang, & Wen, 2023). Despite the growth of English-medium programs, language and cultural barriers continue to affect students' full integration into academic and social life.

Malaysia presents a holistic model beginning at the point of arrival. Universities commonly provide airport pickups, assistance with immigration procedures, orientation

weeks, and specialized English language centers (Azman & Abdullah, 2020; Syed Ahmad & Loke, 2022). These measures ease the initial adjustment period, particularly for students from non-English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, some research highlights bureaucratic inefficiencies and the need for stronger academic advising services for sustained support (Syed Ahmad & Loke, 2022).

Meanwhile, Turkey has built a culturally sensitive model emphasizing student satisfaction. International offices provide continuous support from admission through graduation, complemented by Turkish language courses and frequent intercultural festivals (Çiftçi & Öktem, 2024). While students generally report positive experiences with cultural adaptation programs, variations in English-language program quality between universities remain a concern (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Comparative analysis of the supportive methods by countries*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Strengths</i>
United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mentoring programs (experienced students mentor newcomers)</li> <li>- Pre-sessional English courses</li> <li>- Academic writing centers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong language preparation</li> <li>- Early academic skill development</li> <li>- Well-structured mentoring systems</li> </ul>
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Orientation programs</li> <li>- International student offices</li> <li>- Embedded counseling initiatives (culturally sensitive psychological support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive support (academic, psychological, administrative)</li> <li>- Psychologists work directly within international student offices</li> </ul>
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Free or low-cost education</li> <li>- Buddy programs (local students help international students)</li> <li>- German language preparatory courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Affordable education</li> <li>- Integration support through local communities</li> </ul>
Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International student centers</li> <li>- Mental health and counseling services</li> <li>- Career development workshops tailored for international students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multicultural, welcoming society</li> <li>- Strong emphasis on permanent residency pathways</li> </ul>

South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mandatory Korean language courses</li> <li>- Peer tutoring programs</li> <li>- Cultural clubs and international festivals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active campus life and structured social integration</li> <li>- Government scholarships and support programs</li> </ul>
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International student offices</li> <li>- Chinese language courses</li> <li>- Mentorship programs with local students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Growing English-medium programs</li> <li>- Focus on academic and cultural adaptation</li> </ul>
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Airport pickup services and immigration assistance</li> <li>- Orientation weeks and social activities</li> <li>- English language centers at universities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Holistic support starting from arrival</li> <li>- Practical academic English training</li> <li>- Strong initial adaptation assistance</li> </ul>

Across contexts, certain best practices emerge consistently. Early language preparation—through pre-sessional courses or compulsory language study—is one of the strongest predictors of academic success and social integration (Ammigan et al., 2021; Lee & Schoole, 2020). Structured peer mentoring and buddy programs, prominent in the UK, Germany, China, and Malaysia, are similarly effective in reducing emotional isolation and encouraging cultural adaptation (Finger & de Wit, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023).

Moreover, integrating culturally sensitive mental health services, as seen in the United States and Canada, significantly enhances psychological resilience among international students (Le & Gardner, 2021; Yu & Wright, 2021). Although not universally offered, career development programs play a crucial role in helping students align their educational experiences with professional goals, ultimately influencing decisions to remain in the host country (Sakız & Jencius, 2024).

However, literature also identifies persistent gaps. Few studies explore the long-term impacts of support systems on students' career trajectories post-graduation. Furthermore, student agency—the active role of international students in creating support networks and adapting strategies—remains underexplored. Finally, while language preparation is emphasized, relatively little attention is given to integrating students into academic discourse communities, a critical factor for sustained academic success (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Drawing from international best practices, Kazakhstani universities could expand structured peer mentoring and buddy programs, introduce comprehensive English-language academic preparation courses, embed culturally sensitive counseling services within student support centers, provide career development workshops tailored for international students, and foster informal intercultural interaction through festivals, clubs, and language exchange programs. Such an integrated support system would significantly enhance international students' experiences in Kazakhstan, helping the country position itself more competitively in the global education market.

### **Addressing The Communication Barrier Among Students**

Students also need to take measures, through their efforts, to overcome communication barriers despite the actions taken by universities. Rani (2016) recommends tips to overcome communication barriers, such as cultural, language, and environmental barriers. It is essential to know who the person is communicating with, the requirements they may have for their language, and remember that preparedness is also important. Students should try to control the volume and intonation of their voice in appropriate situations. Studying photographs, diagrams, and drawings to understand an interlocutor's intentions is better. Rani (2016) argues that students can improve their speaking skills by actively listening and observing native speakers. From my point of view, it is one of the effective ways to overcome the language barrier.

As stated above, environmental barriers arise from the surroundings. Rani (2016) advises muting or not using mobile phones while communicating. The workplace dramatically influences a person's cognitive abilities. The author creates a case where teamwork is carried out. In this case, the room should be excellent since warmth causes drowsiness. Moreover, the safety of the place must be considered. However, it is correct to

remember that even though the third face creates environmental barriers, students can directly influence their overcoming.

Cultural barriers also influence students' behavior, as they may feel alienated. Rani (2016) states that respecting others' feelings and views is key. This is an important value in Kazakhstan, as traditional values, language variety, and social norms can challenge students. In addition, the Kazakh language may be easier for Turkic-speaking countries to study. The author suggests asking questions while respecting the privacy of the interlocutor. Additionally, refraining from unsolicited advice can foster mutual understanding. Students with different cultural backgrounds coming to Kazakhstan should understand the cultural nuances of the locals. People's views differ based on their culture; therefore, the most crucial aspect is to respect others and not try to change their concepts to their detriment.

In addition to Rani's (2016) recommendations, current research highlights how students interpret and overcome communication barriers abroad. For example, according to Zhang et al. (2021), international students at American universities report that one of the main challenges is the language barrier and differences in communication styles, such as directness of expression or ways of conducting discussions. They highlight the importance of developing intercultural competence skills and adapting to different academic expectations. Wang and Su (2020) highlight that in the Australian university context, students perceive the presence of "hidden rules" of communication as one of the most challenging aspects of adjustment.

They note that informal classroom expectations, such as active participation in discussions, may conflict with cultural norms from their home countries, leading to feelings of social isolation. Tang and Zhang (2023) discovered that higher levels of face-to-face and online contact with host nationals, together with intercultural communication skills and lower perceived threats, motivated international students to form social connections and participate

in campus life. Students who were involved in such activities adapted more quickly both academically and socially. Furthermore, research confirms that having mentors among local students helps international students better cope with cultural and linguistic difficulties (Le, Sok, & Heng, 2024). Mentoring programs not only provide information on the practical aspects of campus life, but also increase self-confidence and facilitate the formation of sustainable social networks.

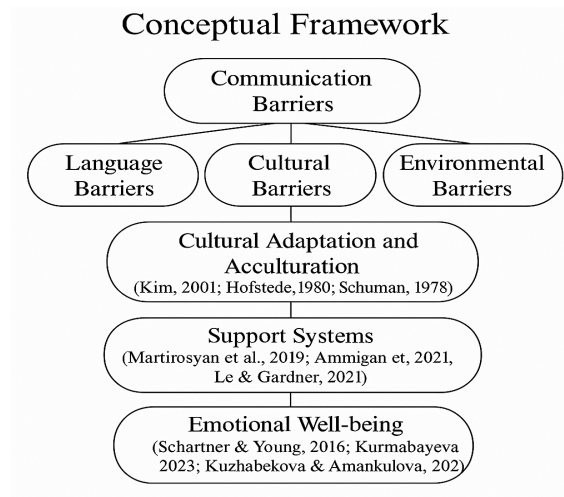
Thus, today's students perceive communication barriers as a multi-layered problem involving language, cultural, and social aspects, and actively use adaptation strategies such as increasing language practice, participating in cultural activities, building support networks, and seeking help from university services. These results confirm the importance of an approach focusing on student efforts and active university support.

### **Conceptual framework**

The proposed conceptual framework outlines the theoretical underpinnings, key concepts, and their interconnections that will guide this research. It draws on key theories such as Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (1980), which provides insights into how cultural differences impact communication; Kim's Theory of Cross Cultural Adaptation (2001), which underscores the fluid process of adapting to the new culture; Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital (1982), framing how students' prior linguistic and cultural knowledge affects their ability to navigate academic and social contexts; and Schumann's Acculturation Model (1978), focusing on the role of language in acculturation and how social and psychological distance hinders or facilitates language acquisition. These theories guide the identification of key concepts such as communication barriers (e.g., language proficiency, non-verbal communication differences), cultural adjustment (e.g., adapting to academic norms, navigating cultural values), support systems (e.g., institutional support, peer networks), and emotional well-being (e.g., feelings of isolation, coping mechanisms). A conceptual diagram

(Figure 2) illustrates the relationships among the identified theories, key concepts, and research problems.

**Figure 2**  
*Conceptual framework*



Philosophically, this framework is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing that students' experiences are shaped by their interactions with the host culture, institutional structures, and personal backgrounds. By integrating these theories, the framework provides a structure for analyzing students' experiences within the broader context of cultural adaptation while offering practical solutions for reducing communication barriers through targeted institutional support programs.

Language, psychological, cultural, and environmental barriers must be solved to guarantee the proper achievement of students in local communities. As discussed before, universities are important in navigating and supporting foreign students to avoid communication barriers. However, efforts should also be made on the students' side to address the communication barriers. The topic of overcoming communication barriers among international students remains an open problem for research. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory's idea can be considered a base affecting international students' communication and

adjustments. It shows how cultural differences affect the behavior and interactions of students in a new academic environment.

In my study, this theory helps reveal why students face communication barriers. Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory (2001) also focuses on the behavior and steps of adapting foreign students in social and academic settings. In general, explaining how students slowly adapt to a new environment. Another important factor in adapting is the cultural foundation of the students. This study not only concentrates on a certain culture but also on different ones. Bourdieu's (1982) main idea is how students' cultural background affects the process. Additionally, this theory benefits by answering the question as to why some students might struggle more than others based on prior experiences. Moreover, it helps to discover how cultural barriers affect the students' adaptation process. Compared with other theories, Schumann's theory includes local students because their interaction can greatly affect students' language learning or social and academic performance. One of the main aspects of this study is finding effective supporting measures for international students. It is important to know that not only does the university contribute, but also the local people.

All these theories help explain the main reasons for the existence of communication barriers. Examples of factors that contribute to students' communication difficulties include cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980), the process of adjusting (Kim, 2001), prior knowledge (Bourdieu, 1982), and emotional or social relationships (Schumann, 1978). This study will investigate how these obstacles impact pupils and how they might be lessened by utilizing these theories. The review of the concepts and existing literature highlighted the primary concepts and methods related to the impact and causes of communication barriers experienced by international students. The employed theories, including Hofstede's (Hofstede, 1980) model of cultural dimensions, Kim's (Kim, 2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1986) theory of cultural capital, and Schumann's

(Schumann, 1978) model of acculturation, provide a holistic explanation of the comprehension of phenomenon concerning the students' adaptation to an academic culture within a new environment with regards to the linguistic, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors.

During the literature review, some empirical studies confirmed that international students in Kazakhstan face a whole range of difficulties, from linguistic and cultural to psychological and institutional (Maratova et al., 2019; Mukhamejanova & Konurbayeva, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). The topic of the language barrier is mainly raised in the works: it manifests itself not only in insufficient knowledge of grammar, but also in the difficulty of understanding academic terms, humor, or informal communication (Bukhari et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2021). I also found it important to note that cultural differences (Mirdehghan et al., 2011), as well as a low level of cultural sensitivity on the part of the host side (Zhang et al., 2021), can significantly complicate the process of social and academic adaptation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite all the studies, several gaps of interest for further investigation have been revealed. To begin with, there is a pronounced gap relating to the emphasis on the students' active participation regarding their adjustment and integration into a new culture. To what degree do international students formulate and execute personal plans to address communication obstacles? These barriers could be addressed by technology resources, joining cultural or academic organizations, forming informal study groups, and other self-directed initiatives. Nevertheless, these areas are rarely addressed in detailed research.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter provides information about the vision I used as a researcher, research design, site, sample, data analysis approach, ethical considerations, and study limitations. The study used a qualitative method that addresses the main research questions, including examining common communication barriers and analyzing university support measures. This method allows for a deep analysis of the central problem and recognition of the best practices for its solution (Creswell, 2015, p. 16).

#### **Philosophical paradigm**

This study is grounded in a constructivist-interpretivism paradigm, which aligns with understanding international students' experiences of communication barriers in a private Kazakhstani university. In line with the constructivist worldview, reality is assumed to be socially constructed, subjective, and context bound. International students' linguistic, cultural, psychological, or environmental challenges are not considered universal or objectively fixed but shaped through individual perception and interaction with local institutional and cultural contexts (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

An interpretive approach guides the methodology by focusing on meaning-making processes as students adapt to new academic and social environments. Through qualitative inquiry, that is, semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to co-construct understanding with participants rather than to measure predefined variables. This epistemological stance is supported by Charmaz's (2014) notion of co-constructed knowledge, where insight emerges through dialogue between the researcher and the participant.

The ontological assumption of this research is relativist; that is, it accepts the existence of multiple realities depending on participants' cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, and interpretations of institutional environments. For example, what constitutes

a “communication barrier” may vary significantly between students from linguistically similar countries (e.g., CIS nations) and those from distant cultural contexts (e.g., South Asia or Africa). This approach enables the study to capture the complexity and diversity of international students’ adaptation journeys.

Moreover, this paradigm complements Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which conceptualizes adaptation as a fluid, stage-based process shaped by interaction and reflection. It also supports the broader conceptual framework that incorporates Hofstede’s, Kim’s, Bourdieu’s, and Schumann’s theories—all of which emphasize context, perception, and cultural capital in shaping human behavior and integration.

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm enables this study to go beyond surface-level observations and explore the nuanced, context-sensitive meanings that international students assign to their academic and social experiences in Kazakhstan.

### **Research Design**

This single case study allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomena, processes, and relationships that may be missed in other studies. Analyzing behavior, study process, and communication between students and professors or advisers is crucial to answering the main question. In this study, a case of one private Kazakhstani university is applied. The university offers academic mobility, exchange, and bachelor’s programs for international students, and it has a formal internationalization strategy. According to Yin (2018), a case study is appropriate when the research seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions about a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This study seeks to answer these questions: “How do international students adapt to a new environment?” and “Which barriers hinder this process?” (p.13).

## **Sampling strategy**

### ***Research site***

A private university in Kazakhstan was selected to investigate how communication barriers are addressed within their contexts. First, private universities are more suitable, as they have funding from tuition fees and private donations (Glover & Levacic, 2020). The teaching system is the reason for choosing a private university, not a public one. If public universities follow a more traditional, government-regulated curriculum, private universities will be more flexible and innovative in teaching methods. Another criterion for choosing one of the private Kazakhstani universities is its position in Atameken in academic programs since 2023. Moreover, the aim was to choose the university from the central part, as it is close to the capital, and international students will see opportunities mostly in big cities. It also explains the resources, guidance, and infrastructure at the students' disposal and might have deeply impacted on their experiences and outcomes.

The case is the university as an institutional unit, and the experience of adaptation of international students within this environment. The university under study was founded more than ten years ago and today is one of the leading private universities in the country. It ranks high in the national Atameken ranking (2023) due to its strong academic programs in social and human sciences and actively participates in international educational initiatives. The university is located in the capital, providing access to various cultural, academic, and professional opportunities.

### ***Research Sample***

The study involved two categories of respondents: international students and university representatives. The sample considered in the study consisted of seven participants: five international students and two university staff. A sample size of 5 individuals is sufficient for conducting semi-structured interviews, as qualitative research

aims to analyze data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) thoroughly. A random sampling technique was used to ensure that students from all backgrounds and experiences are included (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 39). This sampling allows the choice of participants relevant to the research problem (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Also, random sampling gives everyone an equal chance to participate in the research. At the same time, a purposive sampling strategy was applied so that university representatives could choose individuals directly involved with international students.

The selection criteria for the university representatives are related to their direct involvement in interacting with international students. Employees of the international office and the academic department were selected. One of the participants works in the admissions office, coordinates students' arrival, and organizes integration and support activities. The second participant is an academic coordinator who oversees issues of the educational process, the interaction of teachers with international students, and the adaptation of students to the academic environment. Thus, both specialists have direct professional experience and knowledge of the barriers and difficulties faced by students from other countries.

The main population of this study is international students who came by any program, such as academic mobility, a bachelor's degree, or an exchange program. According to the choice, international students study for at least one semester to four years. Thus, the study period is not as important as being a citizen of another country. Applied programs are not crucial because communication barriers can appear whether they are humanitarian or STEM students. On the contrary, it will provide more information for analysis. Additionally, the age requirement is more than 18 years old. Table 2 below presents demographic data, including participants' country of origin, role, and Russian language proficiency level.

**Table 2**  
*Demographic information about participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Russian Proficiency Level</b>
<b>P1</b>	Denmark	International student 1	A2
<b>P2</b>	France	International student 2	B1
<b>P3</b>	Wales	International student 3	B2
<b>P4</b>	India	International student 4	A1
<b>P5</b>	UK	International student 5	A2
<b>R1</b>	-	International Office Staff	-
<b>R2</b>	-	Academic Coordinator	-

All five participants are international students studying at the same private university in Astana. They represent different European and Asian countries, including Denmark, France, India, and the UK, allowing for a broad cultural and linguistic context. Russian language proficiency ranges from A1 to B2, reflecting different degrees of language integration. The number of participants, five students, was chosen based on a qualitative research approach favoring in-depth understanding over broad coverage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This number allows for detailed content analysis and comparison of data across categories. The two additional participants are university representatives. One is an international student support officer, and the other is an academic coordinator, overseeing the learning process and academic support. Their inclusion in the sample provides an institutional perspective and allows for comparison of student and administrative views. This sample composition allows for a diversity of perspectives and also for triangulation of data by comparing student experiences with university policy makers and views.

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private university, after official permission from the university administration, interview participants were selected. The consent form and interview questions were written in three languages (English, Kazakh, and Russian) (Appendix A). Different languages may benefit if students or university administrations do not speak English fluently.

## Data collection

The methodological triangulation was used to increase the reliability of this study. This allowed us to compare results and verify information obtained from different sources. A member-checking strategy was also used: after the interview, respondents were asked to read a summary of their statements to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation. Such measures increase the validity and reliability of the research results (Yin, 2018). Table 3 shows that the questions were relevant to both categories of participants, and the next chapter will present examples of coding and excerpts from interviews (Appendix C). This will allow us to reflect on the data analysis process and the logical connection between the participants' statements and the identified themes.

**Table 3**  
*Achieved triangulation*

Topic	Questions for Students	Questions for the Department	Correspondence
<b>Adaptation Experience</b>	How did you adapt to a new culture? What differences did you notice?	How do cultural differences between students and faculty affect communication?	Confirms the impact of cultural differences
<b>Language Barriers</b>	Have you faced difficulties communicating with professors and peers?	What language barriers do international students most commonly experience?	Cross-checks the existence and impact of language barriers
<b>Psychological Barriers</b>	Have you felt anxious or uncomfortable due to communication challenges?	What challenges (stress, anxiety) do international students report during adaptation?	Compares student and institutional perspectives on communication-related stress
<b>University Support</b>	What resources or courses have helped you adapt?	What strategies does the university use to support students? How do you measure their effectiveness?	Verifies the effectiveness of university programs
<b>Social Integration</b>	How has your ability to communicate changed since you started studying here?	Have you observed any improvements in academic and social integration among international students?	Aligns students' self-assessment with institutional observations
<b>Improvements</b>	What would you suggest to improve support for international students?	What barriers does the university face in improving communication support? What future initiatives are planned?	Identifies gaps between student expectations and university efforts

The interview questions included six questions regarding international students and university members. The first block was created according to Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory (2001). It includes questions for students about how they adapt to a new culture and, for faculty, how cultural differences influence communication between students and faculty. The second and third blocks of questions aimed to find whether students face language and psychological barriers. One of the most important questions for university advisers is what problems international students report during adaptation. It will provide an opportunity to look at the problems from both sides. Another block of questions aimed to find data about the university's supporting measures. The remaining two blocks are considered regarding social integration and future improvements. At the end of asking the main questions, I asked participants if they had any questions to ensure clarity and provide an opportunity for further discussion.

In qualitative research, it is crucial to analyze each participant's answers; therefore, a semi-structured interview is the most effective method, as it does not require a strict order of questions and allows for adjustments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 136). Compared with other types of interviews, such as highly structured and unstructured, semi-structured interviews help handle unexpected questions or complex topics that may arise during the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This method allowed participants to communicate on their terms, making data collection more authentic.

Overall, the dissertation research design is a qualitative method, namely, a semi-structured interview, which is used to actively get to know international students' and advisers' unique experiences and opinions in the context of communication barriers. The framework specified in which method is used helps to make a thorough presentation and to grasp the comprehensive assistance activities made at the two universities in Astana.

## Data Analysis

This section discusses different approaches used to analyze the collected data. The participants were informed that the interview was being recorded and accessible only to the researcher, and all information would remain anonymous. A smartphone (iPhone 14 Pro Max) was used to record the interviews in case I had an interview protocol (Appendix B) with interview questions and free space to make notes. An interview protocol was needed if technical issues arose during recording. After each interview, the recordings were immediately transferred to a password-protected external hard drive and a cloud storage service (Google Drive with two-factor authentication). After the transfer, files were deleted from the smartphone to ensure data security. Furthermore, some participants required access to review the interview questions before starting; this benefited by reducing anxiety and being ready to answer.

It is important to remember that students have different cultures, nationalities, and academic disciplines. It enables an understanding of the difficulties students face when overcoming communication barriers. While interviewing, I remained aware of taboos and avoided questions that could make participants uncomfortable. First, I started with general questions to break the tense atmosphere. Specific questions were asked carefully to ensure cultural adequacy. Additionally, cultural differences, accents, and jargon were considered during the analysis. The reason is that it will be helpful for future research. Once the data had been transcribed using a software program called “TurboScribe” and manuals to check for accuracy, axial codes were created to organize the data. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify common themes, patterns, and variations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After analyzing, five deductive thematic themes were based on the conceptual framework and literature review: language confidence, cultural adaptation strategies, emotional resilience, institutional support gaps, and peer-to-peer support systems. The first

theme corresponds to Schumann's Acculturation Model (1978) and highlights the importance of social and psychological integration for successful language acquisition. Language-challenged students demonstrated high social distance and difficulties in study adaptation. The second theme, "Cultural adaptation strategies," is connected to Kim's (2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory. The interview revealed that students developed individual ways of dealing with cultural differences, which supports Kim's ideas about the need for active participation of the individual in the adaptation process. The topic of emotional resilience is directly related to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Students' coping skills, adaptability, and intrinsic motivation increased their ability to use previous experience and knowledge in a new environment. Gaps in institutional support reflect Hofstede's (1980) ideas about the influence of cultural differences on expectations and interactions. The lack of sensitivity of university structures to cultural diversity reinforced barriers, confirming the importance of considering cultural specificities in educational policy. Finally, the topic of support systems between students integrates both Kim's theory and Bourdieu's concept of social capital. Informal student communities have become an important factor in successful adaptation, especially in conditions of insufficient institutional support.

Moreover, triangulation was achieved by engaging a second group of participants: representatives from university departments that engage with overseas students. The research findings were enhanced by their contributions which provided a broad understanding of institutional approaches to communication barrier management. Additionally, the university provided documents for comparison between interview results and official requirements. These documents consist of three university policies: Academic Policy, Admission Policy, and Development Strategy for 2024 - 2027, which focuses on international student enrollment growth.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The participants received detailed information about study goals, advantages, procedures, and possible risks before they agreed to participate in the interview. The researchers implemented measures to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. The analysis and reports require the deletion of all personal information and data.

According to Patton (2015), ethical research involves 12 steps, which include defining study purposes, explaining participant roles, and recognizing participant contributions through reciprocity. Participants must give voluntary consent after understanding all possible risks during the informed consent process. The researcher must preserve privacy while handling data ownership and consult ethical experts when necessary. The process becomes fair through transparent boundary disclosure about data collection, while methodological choices that align with ethical standards establish trust. These measures will help nurture respect, ensure no harm, and uphold credibility.

The study required maintaining trustworthiness together with the protection of participant vulnerability throughout its duration. I have established trust through detailed explanations about response confidentiality and voluntary participation, and the right of participants to withdraw at any time without facing adverse consequences. In addition, open-ended, neutral questions were used to encourage participants to answer honestly, avoiding leading or judgmental language. Several potential risks were identified and proactively addressed to minimize possible negative consequences. The study protected participant anonymity by using fake names instead of actual names while deleting all identifying details from interview records and the final research document. The participants were informed about their right to avoid any question and end the interview whenever they wanted without needing to explain their reason. The participants had the freedom to select their interview language between English and Russian and Kazakh while receiving extra clarification when

needed to understand the questions. Also, they received assurance about confidentiality because their responses would stay private and university management would never receive their information and their academic standing would remain unaffected. The process of member-checking strengthened the reliability of the study because participants reviewed interview summaries to verify the accuracy of recorded information. The participants' actual perspectives were accurately captured through this procedure. This study used data triangulation between two respondent groups, including students and university staff, to boost both reliability and validity of its findings.

The research requires exceptional sensitivity because of cultural background differences across all research elements. The study maintained participant comfort through cultural awareness of beliefs and customs. The research aims to help international students by studying communication obstacles and support systems. The study reduced potential risks of discomfort or emotional distress by implementing careful planning alongside debriefing procedures and providing support services when needed.

### **Risks and mitigations**

One of the important principles of guaranteeing reliability and validity is to conduct ethically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative reliability strategy was used to check for coding mistakes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative validity strategy describes findings in detail and demonstrates any problems or negative information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A problem is the agreement between university organizations and international students. It limited the number of participants in the study, leading to a lack of generalizability. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis is subjective and may be influenced by researchers' biases, potentially affecting the reliability of findings. Qualitative research necessitates careful planning to guarantee that the results are accurate. It is impossible to

analyze qualitative data mathematically. This style of research relies more on opinion and judgment than on results. It isn't easy to reproduce since each qualitative study is unique (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Limitations and mitigations*

<i>Potential Problem</i>	<i>Proposed Solution</i>
Little agreement between the university and the students	A clear explanation of the study, including an explanation of its benefits. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.
Poor number of respondents	Using the random sampling method
Subjective qualitative analysis data	Have multiple researchers or peer reviews when coding to limit subjective analysis and have a more objective analysis.
Researcher bias in interpretation	This can be addressed by using member checking or participant validation to confirm that findings and interpretations are accurate
Generalizability issues	While limitations in generalizability can be acknowledged, the focus can be placed on the deep, context-specific insights provided.
Difficulty in replicating results	Document the research process and decisions made during the study so that its unique context can be better understood.

**Conclusion**

This part of the study described the methodological approach that helped to answer the research questions. The study used a qualitative method, which helped to deeply analyze the individual experiences of students and university members. A single case study was chosen as the research model, corresponding to the objectives of studying the adaptation processes of international students in a specific educational environment.

The choice of the place of study was due to the desire to study at a private university with an active internationalization strategy, offering academic mobility and programs in English. Participants were randomly selected, which increased the representativeness of the collected data. Two categories of respondents were interviewed: international students and university representatives, which allowed for data triangulation and an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

Particular attention was paid to ethical issues: measures were taken to protect the anonymity of the participants, ensure voluntary participation, adhere to the principles of

cultural sensitivity, and maintain trust at all stages of the study. Participant verification procedures and using multiple data sources increased the reliability and validity of the results.

Data analysis was done using thematic analysis based on the study's conceptual framework. As a result, key themes were identified reflecting the students' experiences in the adaptation process. Thus, this methodological chapter has laid a solid foundation for the data analysis and discussion of the research findings in the following chapters.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter provides findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with international students and members of a private Kazakhstani university. This research aimed to discover language, cultural, psychological, and environmental barriers. The data collected provided information that the adaptation process is multidimensional and requires an integrated approach.

Internal university documents and empirical data were examined to better understand the educational environment and support programs for international students. The documents analyzed consisted of the Admission Policy (2024), the Academic Policy (2024), and the University Development Strategy for 2024–2027.

The Admission Policy outlines the complete enrollment procedures and requirements for international students who want to join undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The principles of inclusive education receive specific focus in this document, while it ensures equal opportunities through language testing. International students must submit international language proficiency certificates (IELTS, TOEFL, Duolingo, Cambridge exams) and take internal tests in Kazakh or Russian, based on their chosen program. During their interviews, students reported bureaucratic challenges and limited English availability of administrative services, despite the document's emphasis on transparent and inclusive procedures.

The academic policy (2024) supports the admission policy by establishing rules for student academic performance, mobility, and support systems. The document outlines procedures for granting academic leave and calculating average grades and program transfers, as well as inclusive education requirements. Students with special needs receive modified study plans and complete access to required facilities. The interview results showed international students received inadequate implementation of these measures, particularly regarding academic counseling and language support.

The University Development Strategy for 2024–2027 sets out priority goals: development as an educational and research center, improving the quality of student experience, internationalization, and ensuring student well-being. Specific actions include increasing the number of international students, improving the support system, expanding academic mobility programs for students and faculty, and obtaining international accreditations. However, as interviews showed, internationalization efforts vary across faculties, indicating a gap between strategic goals and their practical implementation.

### **Main themes**

One of the main conclusions of the findings is the relationship of language, cultural, and psychological barriers that complicate the adaptation process of international students.

### ***Academic context***

The language barrier is not only about grammar; it considers comprehension of academic speech, sarcasm, and non-verbal signs. According to the interview results, despite the basic knowledge of Russian and Kazakh, international students face challenges in understanding teachers and expressing their ideas in academic settings, in the course context, assessment, and feedback. The five participants' Russian language level was A1–B2.

Participants 1, 2, and 3 mentioned:

“Even if I understand the words, I can't always understand what the teacher wants”

(P1).

“I was afraid I'd say something wrong and everyone would laugh” (P2).

“Sometimes I understand academic topics but struggle when the teacher uses jokes or slang” (P3).

Cultural differences among students play a crucial role, as participants are from the United Kingdom, France, India, and Denmark. To illustrate, for Kazakhstani professors, silence in the classroom means passivity, while for some students, it represents respect. The

diversity of ideas about the status of the teacher, group interaction, and classroom rules can lead to misunderstandings.

Moreover, the fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence decrease students' activity and hinder their participation in classes. These barriers do not exist separately; they complement each other, creating a big problem.

A consistent theme among participants was difficulty comprehending course materials, particularly when specialized terminology, abstract theoretical content, or culturally specific examples were used. Even students with conversational proficiency in English or Russian found academic texts challenging.

“It was difficult to understand the textbooks. They use very complex words and examples that are local. Even when I look up the words, sometimes I still don't get the real meaning” (P3).

Another participant emphasized how cultural context shaped understanding:

“In my economics class, they talked about things like “dacha” or “kolkhoz” without explaining. I did not know these words because they are very Soviet history specific. So, I missed part of the meaning” (P5).

Similarly, references to uniquely Kazakh cultural concepts created confusion among international students unfamiliar with local traditions and terminology. One student shared:

“In my sociology class, the teacher kept mentioning “Asar” and “Shanyrak” as examples of community support and family structure, but I didn't know what these meant. I felt lost even though I understood the general topic” (P2).

Another participant highlighted difficulties when local language terms were casually mixed into academic discussions:

“During one lecture, the professor talked about “Zheti ata” (seven generations) and used it to explain social structures. It was interesting, but without understanding Kazakh customs, it was hard to relate it to the theory we were learning” (P1).

Moreover, academic texts or presentation slides sometimes contain untranslated Kazakh or Russian terms:

“In my law course, the materials often had Kazakh words like “konstitutsiyalyk reforma” (constitutional reform) without translation. I could guess the meaning, but it was stressful during exams when every second counts” (P4).

The examples show that international students in Kazakhstan experience extra challenges because academic content contains cultural codes that make understanding and academic achievement more complicated.

### ***Teaching Process and Classroom Interactions***

Language barriers and differing cultural expectations about classroom behavior also emerged as significant challenges. Students explained their reluctance to question lecturers or join classroom discussions because they worried about language errors and classroom protocol misunderstandings.

A student noted:

“In my country, you only speak if the teacher asks you. The teaching staff at this institution requires students to ask questions without interruption. My fear of incorrect statements and poor English delivery prevents me from speaking” (P3).

P1, P2, P4, and P5 mentioned their difficulty with lectures that moved quickly and contained informal language and language shifts between Kazakh, Russian, and English. For example,

“The teacher explains in English before suddenly using Russian or Kazakh, which makes me lose my understanding. Following the lesson becomes difficult because I avoid interrupting to ask questions” (P4).

Students from collectivist backgrounds encountered difficulties with independent critical thinking expectations because their cultural background did not prepare them for open debate with teachers.

“They want us to argue with the teacher sometimes, but in my culture, we must respect the teacher and not criticize openly. It feels very uncomfortable for me” (P3).

The research shows that academic achievement depends on more than language ability because students must learn to handle new teaching methods from cultural traditions.

### ***Assessment Practices and Feedback***

Five participants confirmed that language barriers negatively affected their performance in written assignments, together with their exam results. Students faced problems when trying to communicate sophisticated ideas during timed evaluations, resulting in disappointment and a perception of bias.

One student shared:

“I understand the topic, but when I write, my grammar mistakes make my answers look weak. I feel I am graded more on my English than on my real knowledge” (P1).

Others commented on the challenge of interpreting assignment prompts, as they do not understand exactly what the assignment wants. The instructions are very complicated. Even local students help each other to figure it out, but for me it is double hard (P3, P5, P2).

Students who were used to assessment methods based on multiple-choice and memorization found essays and open-ended questions particularly difficult to handle during their academic work.

The process of receiving feedback proved to be another major obstacle for students. Students experienced confusion, demotivation, and personal failure because linguistic barriers distorted the feedback messages that the participants received.

“When I got my paper back, there were many comments, but the language was academic English. I needed to ask a local friend to help me understand what the teacher was saying” (P2).

A different student explained that feedback on mistakes also affected his emotional state:

“When the professor said my ideas were ‘not critical enough, I thought it meant I was stupid. Later, I understood it is about argument style, not about intelligence, but I already felt bad” (P4).

According to students, the academic confidence issues arose from receiving feedback written in unfamiliar cultural or rhetorical styles, which caused interpretation challenges (P1, P2, P3). The students avoided seeking clarification because they feared losing face, according to the cultural norms found in numerous non-Western societies, which restricted their academic development.

The study reveals that international students in Kazakhstan encounter academic challenges because of the course content complexity, teaching methods, and the built-in language and cultural barriers within the educational environment. The lack of proficiency in the Kazakh and Russian languages creates barriers for students to fully participate in academic materials, classroom discussions, and administrative communications. Students encounter additional obstacles in demonstrating their knowledge because they need to adapt to unfamiliar assessment expectations and receive feedback through unfamiliar styles. The combination of cultural differences in teacher-student relationships, assignment requirements, and feedback patterns leads to difficulties in academic performance. International students’

learning outcomes and engagement opportunities will remain unequal unless educational institutions establish specific support systems, including multilingual academic resources, culturally sensitive feedback practices, and expanded preparatory programs.

### **Formal Support Exists, but Access is Limited**

The interviews with two representatives from the International Office, complemented by international students' narratives, reveal important insights into the institutional support mechanisms and their practical limitations.

According to International Office representatives (R1, R2), the university provides multiple layers of formal support for international students. These include payable academic language courses in Kazakh, Russian, and English, a "buddy" system pairing newcomers with local students, cultural events such as "Independence Day" and "Nauryz," and orientation programs like "Welcome Week." There is no strict position of an international student supervisor at the university. Each academic year, a dedicated specialist from the department is appointed to coordinate these initiatives. Their responsibilities include organizing cultural activities, facilitating communication between students and university services, monitoring students' academic integration, and providing referrals for academic and psychological support if needed. These two positions also provide service with international university cooperation, and external academic mobility service for the local students, faculty, and leadership.

Despite the existence of these programs, the students' accounts highlight a very different reality, suggesting that while structures are in place, their accessibility, relevance, and real impact are often limited. Several students reported being unaware of key services. For instance, one participant shared, "*I did not know there was a writing center until my second semester*" (P4), indicating that major academic support resources are not sufficiently communicated during the early stages of students' arrival. Another student added, "*Nobody*

*explained to us who we can ask if we have problems. Only my friend told me about the tutor support” (P1), emphasizing that informal peer communication, rather than institutional outreach, becomes the primary source of information.*

Moreover, while cultural events like “Independence Day” are organized, students often find these activities too superficial. One participant commented, *“They had one cultural event... but it was just dancing. We need something deeper” (P3)*. Students desired activities involving deeper cultural exchange, such as workshops on Kazakh history, traditions, and intercultural dialogue forums, rather than isolated festive performances. Another student remarked, *“It’s interesting to see dancing, but I want to understand more — why it is important, what the history behind it is” (P5)*, indicating a need for educational components within cultural events.

A further challenge is the irregularity and lack of follow-up of support activities. While orientation events such as “Welcome Week” are conducted at the beginning of the semester for all the students who applied, students noted that continuous engagement was missing. One student explained, *“After the first two weeks, there were no more meetings or check-ins. We felt forgotten” (P2)*.

Although the International Office exists, students reported minimal contact after the initial orientation (P2, P3, P4). According to official policy (2020), the International Office representatives’ responsibilities include regular check-ins (at least once a month), monitoring academic progress, and organizing intercultural workshops (p.5). However, students indicated that these meetings rarely occur systematically. One participant noted, *“I would like if there was someone to meet us at least once a month, even in a small group, just to ask how we are doing” (P3)*. The lack of consistent interaction makes students feel isolated and disconnected from institutional support.

Triangulating the perspectives of the International Office representatives and the students reveals a critical gap: although support structures technically exist, they are not consistently accessible, visible, or responsive to students' academic and social needs. Formal mechanisms lack personalization, strategic communication, and sustainability.

The short-term nature of many programs, such as organizing a single cultural festival per semester without ongoing thematic engagement, diminishes their long-term impact. Students need sustained, structured opportunities to integrate academically and socially. In the current model, supervisors are often seen as administrative figures rather than active mentors or advocates, which limits their effectiveness.

### **Informal Strategies as a Way to Overcome Barriers**

Without sufficient formal support mechanisms, international students frequently turn to informal, self-organized strategies to navigate linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges. A typical informal practice among students is the formation of peer study groups. These groups typically comprise international students who share a common language background or who are experiencing similar difficulties with academic material. One participant explained, *"I survived thanks to my roommates. We studied together and helped each other with everything"* (P3). Study groups serve an academic function, helping students understand course content and creating a sense of belonging and mutual solidarity in an otherwise unfamiliar environment.

Another prevalent strategy is reliance on digital platforms. Participants reported using tools such as Google Translate, YouTube educational tutorials, Telegram study groups, and even TikTok videos to supplement classroom learning. *"There was no one from the university helping. I learned from YouTube"* (P1) noted one participant. Particularly for mastering academic terminology in Kazakh and Russian, all students mentioned the following local bloggers who explain complex concepts in simpler language. Some students

subscribed to Telegram channels that post summaries of academic lectures or offer translated versions of lecture slides, filling gaps in comprehension when lectures are delivered too fast or only partially in English.

Language practice clubs initiated by students themselves also emerged as an important informal mechanism. “*We made a small club to practice speaking Russian together*” (P5) shared a participant. The clubs typically gathered in dormitory standard rooms, cafeterias, and nearby parks. The clubs operated without official backing, yet effectively improved students’ communication abilities and self-assurance in daily academic interactions.

The development of informal mentoring relationships became a fundamental adaptation method. International students with more experience provided unofficial guidance to new students about selecting courses and preparing for exams, academic writing conventions, and administrative procedures, including class registration and visa extension processes. The absence of official academic advising led students to use peer-mentoring relationships as their primary support system.

Social media platforms served as essential tools for building informal peer connections. Students created WhatsApp groups, Telegram communities, and Facebook pages, which connected them to other universities and diaspora communities to share academic resources, ask university procedure questions, exchange textbooks and materials, and plan social events. The online communities are an alternative information system that replaces missing formal university communication channels.

Students developed a “Survival Guide” Google Doc, which they maintained to share unofficial advice about teacher expectations, exam formats, and language strategies for academic work. The student-led “Crash Courses” program provides pre-exam instruction through senior students who explain fundamental course material using basic terminology.

The informal strategies show outstanding student initiative but expose multiple weaknesses in the system. The absence of permanent peer support programs indicates that helpful practices lack institutional backing, which would enable their widespread accessibility. The extensive use of external online resources demonstrates that university courses need better pedagogical design to support students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. The practices exist only through student initiative, creating challenges for vulnerable shy, linguistically weak, or socially isolated students.

Moreover, the informal nature of these strategies means that academic standards can vary significantly. Students helping one another are often not trained educators, which can result in the spread of misunderstandings or superficial learning. One student reflected, *“Sometimes we prepared for exams together, but it was more memorizing answers than understanding the real meaning” (P6)*. This indicates the risk of informal strategies reinforcing surface-level learning rather than fostering deep academic engagement.

Such widespread development of informal support systems among international students highlights the student community’s ingenuity and the urgent need for universities to institutionalize and professionally support such practices.

### **Inconsistency between Staff Views and Students’ Actual Needs**

Analyzing staff members’ interviews indicates that they consider support an administrative function, namely, registration, providing certificates, and explaining the rules. Emotional and cultural adaptation is located in the secondary position.

“We do our best to help them settle in — explain the rules and systems” (R1).

“We assume they’ll adapt over time, like all students do” (R2).

According to an interview with the International Office Manager, the primary focus is on organizing the reception and visa documentation. Meanwhile, the formal support strategies do not include emotional well-being or psychological adaptation issues. The

academic coordinator noted that “academic tutoring” is offered to international students, but there is no specific cultural training for teachers, which leads to misunderstandings and mismatched expectations. The existing approach creates a gap between students’ expectations and existing supporting measures of the university, resulting in an underestimation of the emotional and cultural barriers.

### **Successful Adaptation: The Result of Formal and Informal Support**

Some students have successfully adopted a combination of formal and informal student initiatives. To illustrate, most international students cooperated in most cases, such as being together on the language courses and groups, collaborating with local Kazakh students, and forming intercultural connections.

“My Kazakh friend helped me a lot, especially with how to behave in class” (P4).

“Things improved when I started going to language workshops and also had my study group” (P5).

“Joining extracurricular clubs made me feel more included” (P1).

The findings highlight the need to review existing strategies to support international students. While individual resources exist, their effectiveness remains limited due to a lack of coordination, cultural sensitivity, and a systemic approach. An analysis of the university’s 2024–2027 development strategy shows that the university plans to increase the number of international students by providing scholarships and launching more English-language programs. However, these efforts will not fully address student adjustment issues without qualitative improvements in support services. The highest adaptation efficiency occurs when institutional support harmonizes with student-initiated efforts. This finding supports the need to combine academic, cultural, and emotional support for international students.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings show a need to reconsider the current strategies for supporting international students. Although there are individual resources, their effectiveness is limited by the lack of coordination, cultural sensitivity, and a systemic approach. Student adaptation needs administrative assistance, constant interaction, participation, flexibility, and empathy from the university. To enhance the quality of the educational environment in Kazakhstan, it is suggested that students' language skills should be improved through practice-oriented classes, culturally inclusive teaching approaches should be implemented, sustainable mentoring programs involving teachers and senior students should be organized, and emotional and psychological support adapted to the needs of international students should be provided.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter evaluates the research results by linking the collected data from international students with the theoretical framework and existing literature from previous chapters. This research examines how international students at a private Kazakhstani university handle communication challenge and what institutional support measures exist and their effectiveness in helping students adapt and succeed academically. The discussion follows the four communication barriers identified in the study through Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Kim's Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital, and Schumann's Acculturation Model.

International students at Kazakhstani universities face language barriers as the most complex and extensive challenge. The research results of this study match previous findings from both international and local studies (Panocová, 2020; Bukhari et al., 2023; Akkari et al., 2023), which show that poor language abilities affect students' academic results and their mental state and social connections.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) supports the research findings, which demonstrate that students who experience anxiety or fear judgment or self-doubt will avoid classroom participation. Multiple participants in this research expressed their fear of speaking during classes because they feared their Russian pronunciation and grammatical errors would lead to unfavorable judgments from their peers. According to P2, the student understood the concepts but avoided speaking because he feared incorrect Russian usage. The internalization of linguistic insecurity demonstrates personal emotional challenges and institutional shortcomings in creating inclusive academic settings.

The interviews showed that students faced language barriers that extended beyond classroom learning. Students experienced major communication problems when dealing with administrative staff while trying to understand institutional rules and participate in

extracurricular activities. The actual practice at universities diverges from their official English-medium program announcements because administrative interactions, public signs, and academic guidance are mainly conducted in Kazakh or Russian. The gap between the internationalization goals and real-world practices intensifies student feelings of being excluded.

The research results match previous studies investigating Kazakhstan and other developing international education centers. The study by Kaikenov et al. (2024) reveals that students in English-taught programs must deal with bureaucratic processes primarily using Kazakh and Russian languages, thus creating an additional hidden curriculum. The inconsistencies between universities' internationalization efforts and actual practices damage their credibility and potentially lead to decreased student satisfaction and retention rates.

While institutional language support mechanisms exist, such as short-term preparatory courses or general Russian/Kazakh classes, the evidence suggests that they are often insufficiently aligned with students' real academic and disciplinary needs. Several participants reported that available language courses were too basic, not discipline-specific, and did not prepare them for academic writing, critical discussions, or professional communication demands. For example, one student noted, "*The Russian course taught me how to introduce myself, but not how to write essays or answer professors*" (P5). This criticism echoes broader scholarly calls for *discipline-specific language support*, a practice successfully implemented in the United Kingdom and Canada (Ammigan, Dennis, & Jones, 2021; Yu & Wright, 2021).

In response to these gaps, students demonstrated considerable resilience and resourcefulness by developing informal coping strategies. Participants frequently mentioned relying on mobile translation applications, forming study groups, creating peer-led speaking clubs, and consuming online educational content tailored to Russian or Kazakh academic

contexts. These grassroots initiatives reflect the acquisition of what Bourdieu (1986) terms “*cultural*” and “*linguistic capital*” — resources that students actively mobilize to navigate unfamiliar institutional terrains.

However, the heavy reliance on informal strategies also highlights systemic inequities. Students who are more socially active, technologically literate, or linguistically gifted are better positioned to succeed, whereas more isolated or disadvantaged students may fall further behind. This “informal survival strategy” model can deepen inequalities within the international student population, reinforcing the barriers universities seek to overcome.

An important point from the data is the relative absence of structured peer support and language mentorship programs within the universities studied. In contrast to examples from countries such as the United States, South Korea, and Malaysia, where peer language tutoring, conversation partners, and multilingual counseling services are embedded into international student offices (Le & Gardner, 2021; Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023; Syed Ahmad & Loke, 2022), Kazakhstani institutions largely depend on ad hoc or one-time orientation sessions, without sustained academic language scaffolding.

The limited promotion and visibility of existing support resources also exacerbate the problem. As noted in the interviews, some students only discovered essential services, such as writing centers or language clubs, several months into their studies, reducing their potential impact. This points to a need for more systematic communication strategies, ensuring that all incoming international students know available support mechanisms from the outset of their academic journey.

It is critical to recognize that the linguistic challenges international students face are not isolated technical problems but are deeply intertwined with issues of academic identity, emotional well-being, and long-term professional aspirations. Students who cannot fully

express themselves in academic settings often internalize feelings of inferiority, eroding motivation and persistence (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Marginson, 2014).

### **Cultural Barriers and Intercultural Understanding**

Cultural differences emerged as a second central theme in students' adaptation experiences. Students outside the CIS region reported difficulties adjusting to Kazakhstani classroom culture, social norms, and communication styles. For instance, several participants noted that local students and faculty were not always open to intercultural dialogue or collaboration. These created feelings of isolation and reinforced a sense of 'otherness.'

Using Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, we can interpret these experiences as resulting from mismatched expectations between high-context and low-context communication styles, different attitudes toward authority, and contrasting views on classroom participation. While Kazakhstani educational culture retains hierarchical elements, many international students came from more egalitarian or participatory systems, leading to misunderstandings.

The data consistently revealed that there was no formal intercultural training provided to faculty members and local students. The internationalization of institutions requires them to bring in foreign students while simultaneously preparing their home academic staff to interact with students from different cultural backgrounds. The development of cultural competence should be integrated into both faculty development and student orientation programs according to Castro et al. (2016).

The data revealed that students who had linguistic or cultural ties with local communities including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey experienced challenges with integration. The findings indicate that cultural distance plays a significant role and institutions need to develop appropriate support strategies. Students demanded more

organized cultural exchange programs which included international student fairs and language tandems and culturally inclusive curricula.

### **Psychological Barriers and Emotional Well-being**

This research revealed that communication barriers produced important psychological impacts on students. The first semester of study was particularly challenging for international students who experienced anxiety and decreased self-confidence together with homesickness. The research findings align with Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory which demonstrates that psychological adaptation develops gradually through individual characteristics and environmental support systems.

Numerous students expressed their concern about participating in class discussions because of language limitations and worries about receiving unfavorable evaluations. The students avoided taking part in academic activities which caused them to experience social exclusion. Unaddressed emotional burdens lead to negative effects on students' academic motivation and mental health according to Hussain et al. (2021).

The institutions provided counseling services but they restricted their mental health support to counselors who were either multilingual or culturally competent. The limited mental health support access through such barriers diminishes the effectiveness of psychological assistance. The students pointed out that faculty members generally failed to recognize the emotional challenges faced by international students which emphasizes the necessity of pastoral care training for staff.

The analysis revealed that students found peer support to be a crucial element for their emotional well-being. International students who formed friendships with other students from their home country and occasionally with local students who supported them experienced a greater sense of belonging and reduced psychological stress. Introducing peer mentoring

programs together with intercultural student clubs would help institutionalize informal support which would strengthen international students' resilience.

Students experienced difficulties adapting because of environmental barriers which included bureaucratic procedures and unclear administrative communication as well as insufficient coordination between university departments. Several students faced problems while enrolling for courses and understanding the grading system and locating support service information.

Adu-Oppong and Agyin-Birikorang (2014) demonstrate that environmental barriers usually result from organizational factors rather than individual weaknesses. The barriers identified in this study developed from institutional rigidity as well as inadequate English-language communication and inadequate digital infrastructure. Many university websites did not include full English translations and essential documents were accessible only through Kazakh or Russian. This situation shows that the university's internationalization goals fail to match its current operational challenges. True internationalization requires administrative systems to provide clear and multilingual access to all components. A system for international student feedback should be established to allow them to report problems and propose changes.

### **Institutional Strategies: Gaps and Good Practices**

The findings indicate a gap between institutional policies and student experiences. While the university had a dedicated international office and offered some support programs, students found them underpublicized, inflexible, or misaligned with their actual needs. For instance, orientation sessions were often too generic, and language courses were short-term rather than continuous.

Nevertheless, there were examples of good practice. Some faculty members tried to adjust their teaching styles, offer extra consultation hours, and provide bilingual materials. A

few departments organized cultural integration events that students found helpful.

Nevertheless, these initiatives were isolated rather than systematic, indicating a lack of a unified institutional strategy for supporting international students.

A promising strategy mentioned by students was co-creation, allowing international students to participate in designing support services. This aligns with the “students as partners” approach advocated by Bovill (2017), which emphasizes collaboration between students and staff to improve learning environments. Students expressed willingness to contribute to peer mentorship, intercultural training, and feedback collection if given the opportunity.

### **Summary of Emerging Themes**

Overall, the data points to several interrelated themes. Communication barriers are multifaceted and intersect with emotional, cultural, and institutional dynamics. Although informal peer strategies are effective, they cannot replace formal institutional support. Cultural proximity facilitates adaptation; however, tailored intercultural training is still needed. Institutional services often exist in name but lack visibility, accessibility, or contextual relevance. Finally, students are willing to collaborate to improve support systems if institutional structures allow it. These findings confirm previous research (Castro et al., 2016; Panocová, 2020) and highlight gaps that require urgent attention if Kazakhstan seeks to position itself as an international educational hub.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The research based on data analysis revealed four main obstacles that hinder international students from properly adapting to Kazakhstani universities: language barriers, cultural differences, psychological stress, and institutional restrictions. The barriers create a complex system that impacts both academic results and students' social and emotional adjustment. The semi-structured interviews directly showed how communication problems prevent students from fully participating in their studies while restricting their social activities and creating feelings of loneliness.

This research aimed to determine and evaluate the most important communication obstacles international students encounter in Kazakhstan and the current support systems. The study results validated the research objectives because they successfully revealed major communication obstacles, which present support systems that work, and which need enhancement. The study responded to the initial research questions and provided valuable insights into international student adaptation processes.

First, students encounter particular obstacles when they need to understand English academic vocabulary and interpret non-verbal classroom signals and university administrative procedures in Kazakh or Russian while adapting to new academic requirements (e.g., citation rules, critical thinking, classroom participation). Students manage their challenges by using peer interpreters and their international experience and cultural knowledge.

Second, the university provides fundamental support through orientation programs, English-based courses, and administrative services available in various languages. Students indicate that practical support for learning Kazakh or Russian and ongoing intercultural adaptation programs and mental health services access are either limited or inconsistently

applied. A dedicated international student advisor position would help connect academic and administrative needs with cultural support both within and beyond classroom settings.

Third, students recognize that orientation sessions, tutoring, and general advising services are helpful but do not find them adequate. The current system fails to provide practical support, which includes help with housing search, immigration documentation, and understanding local customs. The cultural support system is also limited because it does not include structured intercultural events or training about Kazakhstani academic culture. As a result, most rely on their resources and help from peers.

The research adds theoretical value to cross-cultural adaptation studies by validating Schumann's acculturation theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital concept. An "Analysis of Fishman's GIDS and Linguistic Imperialism on the Decline of Minority Languages" article was published in MNU SLA digest (issue #8) as a discussion of the endangered state of the language alongside the fading endangered languages, demonstrating how the two theories work together in describing the multifaceted language endangerment processes. The paper argued that combining internal community dynamics and external global forces provides a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of language death and suggests new solutions for revitalizing languages

The research findings provide practical applications for university administrators, academic program coordinators, teachers, and supervisors to create inclusive support strategies. The findings provide valuable insights for higher education:

- to establish specific mentoring programs that connect new international students with both experienced students and faculty members who provide academic support and cultural orientation.

- to create adaptable language training programs which include academic Kazakh/Russian instruction and practical situations such as medical visits and official document completion.
- to provide cultural competency training to faculty members who will learn inclusive teaching methods and culturally sensitive feedback approaches and communication style recognition to minimize misunderstandings and bias.
- to establish emotional support programs which include culturally sensitive counseling services and group discussions and workshops to help students manage adaptation stress.

The study has certain limitations. First, the sample size (5 students and 2 staff) does not allow fully the results to be generalized to the entire population of international students in Kazakhstan. Second, the study was conducted at a single private university, and the context may differ from those of other types of universities (public). Third, language barriers and cultural differences may have affected the completeness and interpretation of interviewees' responses. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected students' perceptions of support and isolation, which should also be considered and further explored.

Based on the data analyzed, there are several recommendations for the increase of efficient integration of international students:

- In-depth language training linked to real-life situations and academic requirements.
- Culturally sensitive pedagogy that considers the differences in students' educational traditions.
- Mentoring programs involving experienced students and teachers to support new international students.

- Emotional and psychological support aimed at reducing anxiety and building student confidence.

Additionally, it is essential to note the importance of constantly collecting feedback from students to adapt existing programs and introduce new initiatives that meet their needs.

### **Unaddressed Areas and Future Research**

While this study offers valuable insights, several essential questions remain underexplored. First, how effective are Kazakhstani educational institutions in addressing communication needs through long-term strategic planning and investment? Second, to what extent do international students independently develop and implement their adaptation strategies over time, and how do these evolve? Third, what is the long-term impact of communication barriers on international students' academic performance, retention, and career outcomes?

Future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine how student adaptation unfolds across different phases of the academic journey. Comparative studies between private and public universities could also reveal structural differences in institutional responsiveness. In addition, more research is needed on the experiences of underrepresented groups, such as students from Africa, the Middle East, and non-CIS countries, who may face unique adaptation challenges.

Adapting foreign students has become strategically important for the global internationalization of education. Language and cultural barrier elimination serves both as a path to individual success for students and as a fundamental condition for creating an inclusive, sustainable educational environment. The support that universities provide to international students directly impacts the nation's educational hub reputation while building an open multinational academic environment.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

##### “Navigating Linguistic and Cultural Barriers: A Case Study of International Students in a Private Kazakhstani University”

You are invited to participate in a research study. The aim of the research is to investigate common challenges, particular institutional methods, and the best practices that benefit international students address communication barriers in an academic environment. You were selected as a research participant due to your experience as an international student at [REDACTED]. Your participation will be anonymous, and the recording will be deleted after it is transcribed. The interview will be approximately 20-30 minutes.

The interview questions created ensure that there are no apparent risks related to participating in this research study. By sharing your experience, you may benefit from this study’s results by helping to design efficient support methods that will better help and make adaptation process in a new environment easier for you and for international students in the future.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Please note that you may withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time without any consequences or loss benefits you are otherwise entitled to receive. Alternatively, you can choose not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The findings of this study may be presented at scientific or professional conferences or published in academic journals.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaint about this research, contact:

Aruzhan Kabdesheva  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form.

- I have read the information provided carefully
- I have been fully informed of the purposes and procedures involved in this research study
- I am aware of the usage of data collected, and confidentiality will remain in view of the researcher and shall not be disclosed to others
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research study at any time without giving any reason for doing this
- With full understanding of all of the foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**This signed and dated consent form is an extra copy that you may keep**

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### Форма информированного согласия

#### “Преодоление языковых и культурных барьеров: кейс-исследование иностранных студентов в частном университете Казахстана”

Вы приглашены принять участие в исследовании. Цель данного исследования – изучить распространенные трудности, институциональные методы и лучшие практики, способствующие преодолению коммуникационных барьеров иностранными студентами в академической среде. Вы были выбраны в качестве участника исследования благодаря вашему опыту работы в [REDACTED]. Ваше участие будет анонимным, а запись интервью будет удалена после расшифровки. Длительность интервью составит примерно 20–30 минут.

Вопросы интервью составлены таким образом, чтобы минимизировать возможные риски для участников исследования. Поделившись своим опытом, вы можете внести вклад в разработку более эффективных методов поддержки, которые помогут университету совершенствовать программы адаптации и улучшать академическую и социальную интеграцию иностранных студентов. Результаты исследования могут способствовать повышению репутации университета как института, ориентированного на международное сотрудничество и создание благоприятных условий для обучения иностранных студентов.

Ваше участие в исследовании является полностью добровольным. Вы можете в любой момент отказаться от участия или прекратить его без каких-либо негативных последствий для вас. Результаты исследования могут быть представлены на научных или профессиональных конференциях, а также опубликованы в академических журналах.

Если у вас есть вопросы, замечания или жалобы по поводу исследования, обращайтесь по адресу [REDACTED]

Аружан Кабдешева  
[REDACTED]

Если вы согласны принять участие, пожалуйста, подпишите форму согласия.

- Я внимательно ознакомился(-лась) с предоставленной информацией.
- Мне были полностью разъяснены цели и процедуры данного исследования.
- Я понимаю, что собранные данные будут использоваться с учетом конфиденциальности и не будут переданы третьим лицам.
- Я осознаю, что могу прекратить участие в исследовании в любой момент без объяснения причин.
- Осознавая вышеизложенное, я добровольно соглашаюсь принять участие в исследовании.

Подпись: \_\_\_\_\_

Дата: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Вы получаете дополнительную копию этого подписанного и датированного согласия.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Students/Members of the University

### Interview Protocol

**Title:** Navigating Communication Barriers in Academic Mobility: Case-study of Kazakhstani university

**Research questions:**

1. What communication barriers do international students face during academic mobility at public and private universities in Kazakhstan?
2. What strategies are employed by universities to overcome communication barriers?
3. How effective are these strategies in improving the academic and social experiences of international students at public and private universities in Kazakhstan?

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Location:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Notes for interviewer**

**Before starting the interview, reread the following:**

1. The purpose of the research is to investigate common challenges, particular institutional methods, and the best practices that benefit international students address communication barriers in an academic environment.
2. Identity of participants and confidential information will be strictly protected.
3. The interview will last approximately 20-30 minutes.
4. Participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw or stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. The alternative is to not participate. You can refuse to answer specific questions.

## Appendix C: Coding

Text	Code	Theme
Question 1 Can you tell me a little about yourself and your home country?	redacted for ethical purposes	
Question 2 What motivated you to study in Kazakhstan?	<p>A1: Definitely <b>my study</b>, because in Eastern European Studies, I have concerned myself a lot with the Soviet Union, so for me, the history of Kazakhstan and the culture was what really intrigued me, and also because most exchange students from Denmark, they go to other European countries, so everyone kind of has the same experience, and <b>I really wanted to experience something else outside of Europe</b>, so yeah.</p> <p>A2: We've got a mandatory exchange semester as part of our university course for Russian. And we had multiple options, but <b>Kazakhstan seemed like the one where I would have the most exposure to Russian</b>. Not just within the university, but even just out in the streets. So, in terms of language, it seemed like the best option for me.</p> <p>A3: So, yeah, <b>it's part of my degree</b> at home to, yeah, do, like, a exchange or, like, semester abroad. So, for immersion and then they offered either Estonia or Kazakhstan and I thought Kazakhstan is, it would be cool, <b>it's different</b>, I've never been anywhere like that before. So, yeah, and it would help, immersion since it's <b>mainly Russian speaking</b>.</p> <p>A4: So, there is <b>not a specific reason</b> to study to apply in the Kazakhstan. So, as I say, this program is a tie-up between the Ministry of Justice and <b>Kaspet</b> and [REDACTED] and the main, that is World Intellectual Property or Renunciation. So, World Intellectual Property or Renunciation offers a Master's program all around the world. They have total 18 tie-ups with the top leading universities of the countries. So, for Kazakhstan, they have a tie-up with [REDACTED]. So, I have applied for 3 to 4 universities. So, I was shortlisted for this university. So, I was privileged to get selected and study here [REDACTED].</p> <p>A5: For the course that I'm doing, then we had the option to either be spending a semester <b>in Tallinn, in Estonia, or here in Astana</b>, and that's in order <b>to study Russian in a country where it is spoken</b> for, yeah, one semester. I primarily chose Kazakhstan because I felt that it was going to give me <b>more opportunities to fully immerse in the language, given that it is spoken regularly and widely within the country, whereas in Estonia, it's only certain sections of the population that are speaking it on a day-to-day basis</b>. Also, though, I thought it would be a really interesting place to go to, given that,</p>	<p>(<u>most</u> students come for <u>russian</u> courses, <u>kazakhstan</u> is close to <u>russia</u>.)</p> <p>part of university program</p>

	you know, it's in Central Asia, so very different to anything that I've experienced before, and also it gives good opportunities to be able to travel more in the area and see all that's on offer in this sort of part of the world.	
<p>Question 3</p> <p>How did you choose this university? (Accentuate by mobility, grant, or self-payments)</p>	<p>A1: This was the <b>only university I could choose in Kazakhstan</b>, and I did some research and found that it was one of the top universities, and I really liked also the homepage and everything, it looked like <b>a very modern university</b>, so yeah.</p> <p>A2: It's a mobility system, so our university has got <b>a partnership with</b> [redacted]. So, we just do an exchange. There was <b>no other option</b> for Astana. Technically, we're enrolled in some courses. So, I've got a psychology class, a philosophy class and a business class. But they're completely optional. The only thing that's necessary for us to go to is the <b>Russian language classes</b>. I hadn't heard [redacted] at all before arriving here. We were just told that we'd be sent to a university in Kazakhstan. There was <b>no choice</b> involved.</p> <p>A3: No, <b>I didn't have a choice</b> in selecting the university. It was simply the one that my home university had a partnership with. I have to pay out of my pocket. The reason I have the money is from the UK government, so they give me grants and loans, but not from, as far as this university knows, I'm paying from my own money.</p> <p>A4: Yes. So, first, like shortlisting this university, this comes after the filtration. So, I researched about the, like, already I was a lawyer, I did my graduation in law. So, I was looking for the Master's program in Intellectual Property. So, firstly, I shortlisted which all universities <b>provides</b> the LLM in Intellectual Property and which are the best one. So, I shortlisted and I got to know that for the IP, <b>Wiplo Joint Master's Program</b> is one of the leading, top most, <b>best LLM program and that is offered in very few universities</b> around 16 to 18 around the world. So, [redacted] is among that 16 or 18 universities in the list. That's why I chosen or I got this opportunity.</p> <p>A5: So, for going to [redacted] then, because I'm a Scottish student, then it's covered by the Scottish government. However, for my course here, then I have to pay for it individually. Because it's only for one semester and I still receive a student loan from the UK, then I just pay for it out of my own pocket. I'm afraid it was kind of chosen for [redacted], <b>it wasn't chosen by me</b> [redacted] the organisation through which we study at [redacted] has <b>already chosen</b> [redacted] as being the university people go to study to, and they have a sort of agreement with the university for using their spaces and all of this sort of thing.</p>	<p>(there was little choice when choosing a university.)</p> <p>the lack of choice</p>
<p>Question 4</p> <p>What was your first impression of</p>	<p>A1: I think what I most noticed was <b>the weather</b>, it was very cold, and I was surprised at a lot of things, I did some research, but not so much before I came, I was surprised that <b>people mostly speak Russian, not Kazakh</b>, and people <b>seemed a little bit reserved</b> at first, like out in the streets, they seemed very reserved, but when I came to the university, people were really nice. I</p>	<p>climate and cultural impressions</p>

<p>Kazakhstan and its people? Did it change now? Why?</p>	<p>don't think I had any expectations, because I've never been to a Central Asian country, so I just came with an open mind. I've been out of my country many times, but it's my first time in Central Asia.</p> <p>A2: Kazakh people. When arriving at the university, we had an interesting experience because we arrived at the start of the semester. And we arrived slightly before the other international students. So, we were getting a lot of strange looks because I think people hadn't noticed us. Because obviously there's not that many international students at the university. But then actually after about a week or two, people started approaching us and were really lovely. And were telling us that they'd be welcome to show us around Astana and they'd be very happy. And we've made Kazakh friends now. So yeah, I was a bit startled at first. But then now it's all good.</p> <p>A3: I don't know, hard question. I think people are quite friendly, willing to help, which is nice. I was surprised by that when I first came. What I find difficult is that in the UK, when a stranger speaks to you, they'll say, 'Oh, excuse me, hello.' But here, people just start speaking randomly; they don't look at you or say hello or excuse me—they just start talking. Not in a less polite way, I suppose, but it's different. This is not a bad thing, just a different thing. People are a bit pushier here, whereas in the UK, we're not really. So, yeah.</p> <p>A4: First impression was like, as I heard about, like, Kazakhstan is a developing country as far as I knew that. So, it is near to the Russia. The main perception it was in my mind that is a cold country and it is a Muslim country. So, these two notions I was having. I was aware about that the Kazakhstan economy is more on the natural gases and this one. So, after coming here, I got like one perception that change of about the Muslim country. Like, this is, Kazakhstan is quite a liberal country where the person from different religion also lives very peacefully and they follow their own religion. It's not so orthodox to follow the Islamic culture. So, that notion was different and I was little bit surprised, not surprised, I was expecting this cold weather of, chilly weather of minus 35. So, it's interesting and it's fun here.</p> <p>A5: Um, I think first impressions have been that, you know, the people are very nice and very welcoming, eager to help you and offer you kindness and food, especially. The country itself, my primary impressions have been of being in Astana. And, you know, it's, it seems to be, for the most part, a very modern city, far more advanced in many ways than the UK, so far as I can tell. All of the architecture is quite sparkly and shiny. But I, so last week I was in Almaty though, and I really enjoyed the slightly older feel of being in Almaty. And also, I feel that for me, I don't particularly enjoy a very sort of metropolitan city, which I feel Astana is.</p> <p>However, Almaty feels more friendly as the city goes, you find more people walking around. Part of it's to do with the weather, I think, at the moment, obviously, you know, Astana is not particularly warm. Whereas last week in</p>
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