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## **Exploring the Cultural Integration, Challenges, and Support Systems for Criminal Justice International Students at the University of Baguio**

**Warren G. Moyao, Karla G. Cayasfon**

School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety, University of Baguio, Baguio City, Philippines

[warren.moyao@e.ubaguio.edu](mailto:warren.moyao@e.ubaguio.edu), [karlacayasfon@e.ubaguio.edu](mailto:karlacayasfon@e.ubaguio.edu)

**Abstract.** In today's globalized world, universities continue to welcome students from diverse backgrounds, making it essential to understand the unique experiences of international students. This study dives into the experiences of three international students enrolled in the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety at the University of Baguio during the 2024–2025 academic year. Through detailed, in-depth interviews, the research sheds light on their journey of cultural integration, the hurdles they face, and the support systems they rely on. One major challenge uncovered is the language barrier—many instructors use Tagalog and Ilocano during lessons, making it difficult for the students to fully grasp the material and participate actively. This barrier not only impacts their academic success but also contributes to feelings of isolation. Additionally, all three students identify as non-Christian and have encountered bullying and insensitivity related to their faith, exposing deeper issues of cultural and religious misunderstanding on campus. Academic adjustment is further complicated by fragmented class groupings, which leave students struggling to find a consistent peer community. The participants expressed a strong preference for more stable groupings to create connection and ease their adaptation. Support services like the international student center and library play important roles beyond academics, offering emotional refuge for students dealing with homesickness and loneliness. However, not all students are equally aware of these resources, pointing to communication gaps that need attention. Overall, this study highlights how embracing cultural diversity enriches campus life and calls for practical steps—such as language accommodation, better communication, and cultural sensitivity training—to help international students succeed and feel truly included.

**Keywords.** International students, cultural integration, language barriers, support services, campus diversity

### **Introduction**

Universities worldwide are increasingly becoming hubs for international students. This influx of diverse cultures and perspectives enriches the educational experience for everyone involved. International students bring unique viewpoints and approaches to learning, sparking lively discussions and challenging existing paradigms within classrooms. This exposure to

different cultural backgrounds fosters a more global understanding among all students, preparing them for a more interconnected world.

The University of Baguio boasts a vibrant international student community, bringing together diverse cultures and perspectives. However, adapting to a new academic and social environment can be challenging for these students. This research study aims to understand the experiences of international students at the University of Baguio, with a particular focus on their cultural integration and adjustment within the university community. It further explores how the presence of international students enriches the overall learning environment, highlighting the value of a multicultural university community.

### **Literature Review**

Universities around the world are increasingly striving to internationalize to enhance their global competitiveness and provide diverse academic programs. According to Kim and Zhang (2022), the mobility of global students has tremendously increased over the past decades. In fact, statistic presented by Guillerme (2022) shows that global student mobility rose from 2 to 6.3 million from 2000 - 2020.

In the Philippines, higher education institutions are actively seeking partnerships with foreign universities to foster collaborative initiatives, develop innovative curricula, and launch exceptional projects (Robiños & Alcazaren, 2023). This drive for internationalization aims to enrich educational offerings and create opportunities for cross-cultural learning and academic excellence. Aside from creating a richer learning environment for all students, internationalization fosters intercultural understanding which prepares students for success in an increasingly interconnected world (de Wit, 2020).

However, as the number of international students in an institution rises, the need for effective cross-cultural communication becomes more critical. This growth demands enhanced management strategies for international students to address their unique needs. Additionally, the challenge of helping these students integrate culturally into the campus community has become more significant, requiring thoughtful approaches to promote inclusivity and understanding among diverse student populations (Zhu et al., 2022; Kroesen, 2020). According to Penman et al. (2021), international students experiences higher socio-cultural and academic stress when settling into a new university compared with their local counterparts. Tavares (2021), also stated that besides the social adaptation issues, international students also experience academic challenges, mainly the stress of adapting to an education system with different teaching and learning methods.

The study of Halpern et al. (2022) further revealed that the students faced interpersonal barriers, such as communication challenges with faculty and peers, difficulty understanding class content, and trouble participating in activities, leading to social isolation and difficulty making friends. Language barriers further complicated communication and interactions. Moreover, Abramova et al (2021) emphasizes the need to adequately consider the needs of international students to enhance their social and academic experiences. Curricula should also be revisited to ensure its not excluding diverse perspectives. Likewise, Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2022) suggested that prioritizing international students' welfare, providing language adaptation support, and increasing the accessibility of academic staff are necessities in improving the academic lives of international students. Lakhali et al (2020) also asserted that when both the institutional and personal come into play, a conducive platform is created for students to easily imbibe and transfer knowledge among themselves and between academic staff.

All of these findings aligned well to the identified four interrelated elements of educational integration: technological, academic, sociocultural, and psychological. The combination of their indicators (need for university support, academic performance, proficiency in language, sociocultural adaptation, satisfaction with learning, etc.) generally demonstrates the successful integration of foreign students into the educational process (Kremen et al., 2023).

While internationalization in higher education presents challenges, effective institutional strategies combined with students' own initiative can facilitate a healthy academic life and progress for international students on campus. According to Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2022), universities can promote successful academic integration for international students by implementing effective practices like student orientation programs, targeted teaching strategies, preparatory courses, learning communities, well-organized classrooms, and faculty support. Resch and Amorim (2021) further suggested that universities can facilitate social network formation and assist social inclusion for international students through organized encounters in which international and local students meet. A holistic approach in the creation of the program for international students is also paramount. The program must navigate through culture, language, academic competencies, and support services with corresponding infrastructure facilities. Culture is integral for the delivery of lessons as well as communication in all transactions. Retooling mechanisms must be in place which may cover teaching strategies, access to information, a buddy system to bridge gaps and other related pursuits (Bautista et al., 2024).

In conclusion, while existing research has shed light on the experiences of international students in various contexts, there is a paucity of studies specifically examining the integration and adjustment of international students at the University of Baguio. A deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and support services available to these students is important for creating an inclusive and supportive campus environment. By addressing the research gaps, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on international student experiences and inform the development of effective strategies to enhance their overall well-being and academic success at the University of Baguio.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Understanding how international students adapt and integrate into a new university environment is crucial for fostering a truly inclusive and enriching learning community (Berry, 2006). To gain a comprehensive understanding of these complex processes, the study utilizes a multi-faceted theoretical framework that draws on several established theories. This approach provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities international students face.

Acculturation Theory (Berry, 2006) serves as a foundational framework for this study. It explores how individuals from different cultures adapt to a new cultural environment. Berry outlined four potential acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. This theory helps understand the choices international students make as they navigate cultural differences at the University of Baguio.

Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) emphasizes the role of cultural knowledge and skills in academic success. By examining students' cultural capital, such as language proficiency and academic background, this theory reveals potential challenges and opportunities for academic integration.

Further, the Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2006) focuses on the skills and knowledge needed for effective intercultural interactions. This model allows for an

exploration of the role of university support services in promoting intercultural competence among international students.

On the other hand, the findings of this study resonate with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Firstly, the study contributes to SDG 4: Quality Education. By exploring the experiences of international students at the University of Baguio, the research highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). The study's focus on challenges faced by international students sheds light on the barriers that hinder their academic success and suggests strategies to create a more supportive learning environment.

Secondly, the research aligns with SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities. By examining the experiences of international students, the study contributes to understanding and addressing inequalities faced by marginalized groups (United Nations, 2015). The findings emphasize the need for institutions to implement policies and practices that promote inclusivity and equity for all students, regardless of their cultural background.

Finally, the study is relevant to SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals. The research highlights the importance of collaboration between universities, governments, and communities in fostering a supportive environment for international students (United Nations, 2015). By working together, these stakeholders can create sustainable solutions to address the challenges faced by international students and promote intercultural understanding.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study hold significant value for a range of stakeholders, with the potential to create a more inclusive and enriching learning environment for all.

**School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety.** By identifying the challenges and opportunities faced by international students, the school can gain valuable insights to tailor support services more effectively. This aligns with the growing importance of internationalization in higher education, where universities strive to attract and retain a diverse student body. Furthermore, understanding the impact of existing support services allows for their optimization, leading to a more welcoming environment for international students. This ultimately strengthens the university's reputation for fostering a truly global learning community.

**International Students.** This research directly benefits international students by giving voice to their experiences. Identifying their challenges can lead to initiatives that address them, smoothing their transition and enhancing their overall experience. Additionally, exploring the impact of support services empowers international students by highlighting valuable resources they might not be fully aware of. Ultimately, a more inclusive environment built on the findings of this research can foster a greater sense of belonging and improve the well-being of international students at the University of Baguio.

**Local Students.** Understanding the experiences of international students has a positive impact on local students as well. Exposure to diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds fosters intercultural understanding and appreciation. This enriches the learning environment for everyone at the university, creating a more globally-minded student body, which aligns with the goals of internationalization in higher education.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to understand the experiences of international students at the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety, focusing on their cultural

integration and adjustment within the university community. Specifically, it seeks to explore the following objectives:

1. To identify the challenges faced by international students in adapting to the academic and social environment of the university.
2. To know the impact of the support services provided to international students in facilitating their integration into the university community.
3. To explore how cultural diversity enriches the overall campus environment and student experience.

### **Methodology**

To achieve the study's objectives of understanding the experiences of international students at the University of Baguio, focusing on their cultural integration and adjustment, a qualitative research design was employed. This methodology was selected to provide an in-depth exploration of the complex factors influencing international students' experiences. The following section details the research methods used to collect and analyze data to address the research questions.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the experiences of three international students enrolled at the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety, University of Baguio. The qualitative case study methodology was chosen as it allows an in-depth, holistic examination of the cultural integration, challenges, and support systems experienced by these specific participants within their real-life context. Unlike broader qualitative approaches, the case study design is particularly fitting for focusing on a small number of participants, as it provides a rich, detailed understanding of complex phenomena through multiple data sources and thorough analysis.

Given the limited number of participants, the case study design offers flexibility and depth, enabling the researchers to capture nuanced personal experiences and contextual factors that shape the academic and social adjustment of these international students. This method facilitates a comprehensive exploration of how individual backgrounds, institutional support mechanisms, and intercultural interactions converge to influence the lived experiences of each participant. Furthermore, the case study approach supports the use of purposive sampling, where participants are intentionally selected for their unique perspectives and relevance to the research objectives.

### **Population and Locale of the Study**

This study was conducted at the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety (SCJPS), University of Baguio, among three international students enrolled in the 2024-2025 academic year. The choice of this population and locale reflects the school's commitment to internationalization and its diverse student population, making it a fitting setting to explore the lived experiences of international students. A qualitative case study design was used, focusing on a bounded system consisting of these three participants to provide an in-depth understanding of their cultural integration, adjustment challenges, and the support systems available to them.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: (1) being international students enrolled at SCJPS for at least one academic year; (2) representing different countries and cultural backgrounds; (3) enrolled in either Bachelor of Science in Criminology or Bachelor in Forensic Science; and (4) willingness to participate in the study.

This sampling ensured that each participant contributed unique and relevant perspectives to the case study.

Having only three participants is justified within the qualitative case study framework because the design prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for a comprehensive examination of each case in its real-life context. Each of the three participants offers a distinct case characterized by diverse cultural backgrounds, academic experiences, and social integration journeys within the university environment.

Furthermore, qualitative case study research recognizes that detailed exploration and contextual understanding from a small number of cases can generate meaningful findings that contribute to theory development and practical implications, particularly in specialized or understudied settings such as international student experiences at SCJPS.

### **Data Gathering Tools**

In gathering in-depth data on participants' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a carefully crafted interview guide. Open-ended questions were employed to encourage rich and detailed responses regarding participants' challenges, successes, and perceptions of cultural integration and adjustment within the university environment. The interview guide was meticulously developed to align with the study's research objectives and will undergo a rigorous validation process by experts in the field of intercultural studies and higher education to ensure its reliability and validity.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

To collect relevant data for this study, researchers seek formal permission from the RIECO to conduct the research. Upon receiving approval, the researchers requested permission from the Office of Student Affairs (OSA) for the actual gathering of data. In the data gathering process, the researchers obtained informed consent from participating international students upon explaining the objectives of the study. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to promote open and honest dialogue. To ensure effective communication and comprehension, researchers arranged for professional interpreters if needed, with the consent of the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent.

### **Treatment of Data**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. This involved identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns within the data to generate themes that represented the core experiences of the international students. The analysis followed a systematic approach, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered rigorously to ethical research standards, safeguarding participant anonymity and data integrity throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining their rights as research participants. This form explicitly stated their voluntary participation, the study's objectives, data confidentiality, their right to ask questions, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Participants were also encouraged to ask questions, and breaks were provided during the interview process to ensure their comfort and well-being.

To protect participant anonymity, interviews were conducted in private settings. Pseudonyms such as "Student A," "Student B," and so forth will be used when presenting data. All collected data was stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers. Upon completion of data analysis, appropriate measures were taken to dispose of physical documents.

The study findings will be shared with participants and the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety. Furthermore, the results will be disseminated through a conference presentation involving the faculty members and staff of the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety to contribute to the broader academic community and inform potential policy improvements.

### **Results and discussion**

The results and discussion section of this research paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of international students at the School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety, focusing on their cultural integration and adjustment within the university community.

### **Challenges Faced by International Students in Adapting to Academic and Social Environments**

International students encounter a range of challenges as they adapt to new academic and social environments. These difficulties span cultural adjustments, language barriers, and differing educational expectations, all of which can impact their academic performance and social integration. This section explores the specific obstacles international students face during their stay, highlighting the complexities of navigating both rigorous academic demands and unfamiliar social settings within the institution.

#### **Language Barrier as a Major Academic and Social Challenge**

Language barriers present a formidable obstacle for international students, affecting both their academic performance and social integration. Many students struggle to keep up with lessons delivered in Tagalog or Ilocano, which hampers understanding and participation in class discussions. Beyond the classroom, limited proficiency in local languages often leads to social isolation, compounding feelings of exclusion and vulnerability. This challenge stresses the need for inclusive language policies and targeted academic support to help international students thrive both academically and socially.

The testimonies of Students A, B, and C reveal a consistent pattern of linguistic exclusion experienced by international students in a predominantly Tagalog- and Ilocano-speaking academic environment. This language barrier emerges as a significant challenge in two primary domains: academics and social integration. Academically, Students B and C explicitly mention their difficulty in understanding lessons and following instructions due to instructors frequently using Tagalog during class discussions.

As Student B notes, *"Instructors for major subjects speak in Tagalog during class discussion and I find it difficult to understand the lessons and follow the instructions provided."* Student C links this directly to a decline in academic performance, stating, *"Most of the teachers from SCJPS speak in Tagalog during class discussions so it's kinda difficult to cope up with the lessons, and this has negatively affected my academic performance."* This situation illustrates a critical point about the role of language proficiency in academic adaptation. When instruction is conducted in a language that students are not proficient in, it disrupts comprehension and participation, which are essential to learning outcomes. For international students whose first

language may not be English or Filipino, this creates a disconnect that can exacerbate feelings of isolation and frustration, negatively affecting their overall academic experience. These experiences support the findings of Wilczewski and Alon (2022), who emphasize that second-language proficiency and the ability to interact in the host country are critical to international students' academic adaptation. Their review of over 300 studies highlights that language and communication difficulties are among the most persistent barriers to academic success and social integration in non-Anglophone countries.

Student B's struggle to comprehend instructions further suggests a lack of inclusive pedagogy, where the language used in instruction does not accommodate the needs of non-native speakers. This reinforces the idea that language barriers are not merely minor inconveniences but serious impediments to learning. Abdul-Rahaman, Arkorful, and Okereke (2022) argue that prioritizing international students' welfare, providing language adaptation support, and increasing the accessibility of academic staff are essential strategies for improving the academic lives of international students. Their systematic review found that language ability and institutional support are key personal and structural factors that influence academic integration. Without such support, international students are more likely to experience academic under-performance and social isolation.

This sense of isolation, however, extends far beyond the classroom. The social dimension of the language barrier can be just as damaging—if not more so—than its academic effects. Socially, the language barrier creates a profound sense of isolation and exclusion for international students. Student A recounts experiences of bullying, stating, *“As an international student not knowing how to speak in Tagalog or Ilocano it was hard to communicate and to avoid the students that bully us because of our religion and being a foreigner student.”* This testimony reveals how linguistic limitations compound vulnerability, particularly for students who also belong to religious or cultural minorities. The inability to communicate in the dominant local languages not only hinders social interaction but may also expose students to discrimination and exclusion. Student B further notes, *“Many of my classmates don't have the confidence to speak in English, so they'd rather not talk to me,”* highlighting how mutual language insecurity can lead to social detachment. Similarly, Student C identifies the language barrier as a social hurdle, reinforcing the theme of exclusion and emotional disconnection.

These experiences are echoed in recent research by Alshammari et al. (2023) which found that social isolation among international students is often rooted in language difficulties, which can lead to mental health challenges such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Language barriers not only limit students' ability to form meaningful relationships but also reduce their participation in campus life, contributing to a sense of alienation. Moreover, Luo et al. (2019) found that perceived language competence and social support from domestic students are positively associated with international students' psychological well-being. Without these supports, students may struggle to establish friendships and feel excluded from peer networks. This aligns with the findings of Halpem et al. (2022), who reported that language barriers are a significant predictor of social anxiety and perceived discrimination among international students.

These findings highlight a clear and pressing message: universities need to do more to make every student feel seen, heard, and supported—especially when it comes to language. When schools embrace inclusive language policies and teaching practices that reflect the diverse backgrounds of their students, they're not just improving grades—they're creating classrooms where everyone feels they belong. It's about more than academics; it's about building a community where no one is left out because of the language they speak.

### **Religious Minority Stress and Cultural Insensitivity**

Experiences of religious insensitivity highlight the severe realities faced by some international students, especially those belonging to minority faiths. The three international students in this study all identify as non-Christian, which places them within religious minority groups in the Philippine university context. Such negative encounters contribute to a sense of alienation and emotional distress, undermining students' well-being and sense of belonging. These challenges reveal deeper systemic issues of cultural and religious insensitivity within the academic environment, emphasizing the urgent need for increased cultural awareness, respectful dialogue, and safe spaces that honor diverse religious identities and protect vulnerable students.

Student A shares a deeply personal account, describing how being both a foreigner and a member of a religious minority made them a target for bullying: *"To avoid the students that bully us because of our religion and being a foreigner student."* These words reflect more than just discomfort—they reveal a profound sense of isolation and vulnerability that no student should have to endure. Alongside this, Student C shares a troubling observation: *"Some students and even teachers are insensitive in terms of giving comments to other cultures."* This points to a broader, more systemic issue—one where cultural and religious insensitivity isn't an occasional misstep, but a recurring feature of the academic environment.

Together, these voices highlight two deeply connected challenges: bullying rooted in religious identity and a pervasive lack of cultural and religious awareness that can make international students feel unwelcome or misunderstood. For Student A, the intersection of faith and nationality becomes a source of exclusion, while their suggestion to expand the prayer room speaks volumes about the need for safe, inclusive spaces where students can practice their beliefs without fear. Student C's experience serves as a reminder that insensitivity does not always manifest loudly or overtly; it can be subtle and insidious, particularly when it comes from those in positions of authority.

Research supports these findings such as the systematic review by Sapouna et al. (2023) which found that students from religious and ethnic minorities are significantly more likely to experience bullying, particularly in environments where stereotypes and exclusionary attitudes go unchecked. The consequences of such discrimination are severe: affected students often encounter mental health issues, disengagement from academic pursuits, and are at higher risk of dropping out. The Cyberbullying Research Center (Hinduja, 2019) similarly notes that a substantial proportion of Muslim youth in the U.S. have experienced bullying related to their faith, with even more subjected to online harassment.

These patterns of exclusion extend beyond overt bullying to subtle, everyday interactions. Cultural and religious insensitivity in educational settings is not a theoretical issue; it permeates the daily lived experiences of students, especially those from minority faiths. Yilmazel (2023) found that multicultural classrooms often suffer from a lack of sufficient cultural and religious awareness among both students and instructors, leading to insensitive remarks or behaviors, particularly surrounding religion and ethnicity. Such incidents, while sometimes perceived as minor by onlookers, carry deep emotional impacts for targeted students, causing feelings of isolation and hurt.

The ramifications of this exclusion ripple far beyond the classroom. Yang et al. (2023) emphasized that when international students feel discriminated against or targeted because of their identity, it seriously hampers their social and emotional adjustment. Feeling like outsiders in what should be a supportive academic community only exacerbates the challenges they face. This is especially relevant in the Philippine context, where English may be the medium of

instruction, but cultural and religious norms continue to shape everyday university life. Without intentional efforts to foster cultural and religious inclusivity, international students practicing minority faiths may continue to feel marginalized in environments that should welcome and support diverse expressions of identity.

### **Fragmented Class Batches and Academic Adjustment**

The practice of placing international students in fragmented class groups across different year levels creates significant difficulties in academic adjustment and social integration. Without a stable peer cohort, students find it challenging to build meaningful connections, participate actively, and navigate academic expectations confidently. This fragmented enrollment disrupts their learning continuity and emotional comfort, stressing the importance of designing cohesive class placements that promotes community, consistent peer support, and smoother transitions within the university setting.

Student B shares a specific academic challenge: “The subjects assigned to me are quite sporadic, I’m enrolled in classes across different year levels... This arrangement has made it somewhat challenging to adjust.” This fragmented class schedule—where international students are placed in courses with students from various academic levels—creates a disjointed learning experience. Both Students B and C suggest that grouping international students into a single batch would ease the adjustment process, allowing for more consistent peer interaction and academic pacing.

The experience of being enrolled in fragmented class batches can significantly hinder an international student’s ability to adjust academically and socially. Instead of growing alongside a consistent group of peers, they find themselves in constantly shifting classrooms, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. This lack of a stable peer group makes it harder to form friendships, join study groups, or feel like part of a community. Over time, that disconnection can turn into something deeper: a sense of isolation, confusion, and even self-doubt, especially when trying to navigate a new academic system in a foreign country.

Student B’s difficulty in adjusting reflects a broader issue of academic disorientation, which is common among international students who are not integrated into cohesive learning communities. According to Owusu-Agyeman and Mugume (2023), academic adjustment is strongly influenced by social engagement and peer interaction. Their study found that students who are able to form consistent academic and social relationships are more likely to succeed in their transition to university life. Fragmented class assignments disrupt this process, making it harder for international students to establish these essential connections.

This issue is particularly relevant in the Philippine context. A study by Aton et al. (2020) on international students in a Philippine university found that academic adjustment problems were significantly linked to inconsistent class placements and limited peer interaction. The study emphasized that students who lacked a stable cohort experienced more difficulty understanding course expectations and felt less motivated to participate in class activities.

These findings support the suggestion made by Students B and C: placing international students in a unified batch can provide a more structured and supportive environment. It allows for shared experiences, smoother communication, and a stronger sense of community—all of which are a necessity for academic success and emotional well-being.

### **Effect of Support Services in Facilitating Integration**

International students’ successful integration into academic and social environments is greatly influenced by the availability and effectiveness of support services. These services not

only address academic challenges but also provide emotional and cultural comfort, helping students navigate the complexities of studying abroad. However, awareness and utilization of these resources vary significantly among international students, which impacts their overall experience and adjustment. This section examines how support services facilitate integration, the gaps in awareness, the emotional and academic comfort they provide, and opportunities for improving institutional support.

### **Awareness and Use of Support Services Varies**

The responses of the three international students reveal varying levels of awareness and use of support services available at the university. For instance, Student A candidly admits, *“No, I’m not aware [of support services],”* and adds, *“I didn’t use any support services.”* In contrast, Student B demonstrates familiarity with several resources, stating, *“There is the international student center... library... CCSD for counseling and clinic for medical concerns,”* and notes regular visits to the international student center and library. Similarly, Student C affirms awareness of *“the international room, group chat for international students, CCSD, clinic,”* and reports frequent use of the international student center and library. These varied responses reveal a disparity in both awareness and utilization of institutional support services among international students.

The differing levels of awareness and engagement with support services among these students point to a critical gap in communication and outreach. While some students are well-informed and actively use available resources, others remain unaware of services designed to support their academic and personal well-being. This inconsistency can have significant implications: students who are unaware of support systems may struggle unnecessarily with challenges that could be mitigated through counseling, academic assistance, or community engagement.

Student A’s lack of awareness suggests that information about support services may not be effectively reaching all international students. This aligns with findings from Bucad and Perez (2021), who reported that many students at Western Philippines University were only “moderately aware” of student affairs services, with awareness levels varying significantly depending on the student’s program and campus location. The study emphasized the importance of targeted communication strategies to ensure equitable access to support.

On the other hand, the experiences of Students B and C reflect the positive impact of accessible and well-utilized services. Their regular use of the international student center and library suggests that when students are informed and feel welcomed, they are more likely to engage with institutional resources that enhance their academic adjustment and sense of belonging.

The study of Rico et al. (2021) found that while many universities offer a range of academic and wellness services—including counseling, tutorials, and international student centers—awareness and utilization remain uneven. The study further highlighted those best practices include orientation programs, peer mentoring, and multilingual communication strategies to bridge the awareness gap.

Internationally, Martirosyan et al. (2019) emphasized that academic and social support services are essential for international student retention and success. Their research showed that institutions with proactive outreach and culturally responsive programming saw higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction. Similarly, Al Juboori et al. (2025) found that social support was a strong predictor of academic adjustment among international students, reinforcing the importance of accessible and visible support systems.

### **Support Services Provide Emotional and Academic Comfort**

Support services at the university extend beyond academic assistance to offer emotional relief for international students coping with challenges such as homesickness, loneliness, and cultural adjustment. The three participants describe key spaces like the international student center and prayer rooms as important safe havens that provide solace and opportunities for peer connection. These environments contribute significantly to their emotional well-being, which in turn supports their academic perseverance.

Student C shares, “*Whenever I feel homesick, I find solace in visiting the International Student Center,*” and adds, “*The prayer room also serves as a sanctuary for us.*” They also commend the helpfulness of library staff, stating, “*The people in the library are very helpful.*” Similarly, Student B notes, “*The international student center serves as a welcoming space where I can connect with fellow international students.*” These individual reflections highlight how support services fulfill dual roles: facilitating academic support and nurturing emotional comfort, both essential for successful adaptation to life and studies in a new country.

While these insights come from a small group of participants and should be interpreted with caution, they underscore the importance of dedicated campus spaces and empathetic staff in fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security among international students. For many students dealing with culture shock and adjustment struggles, having access to safe, understanding environments can be as vital as academic resources for overall success and well-being. These stories highlight that campus support services serve two important roles: they help with academics and also provide emotional support. For international students dealing with culture shock, homesickness, and loneliness, places like the international student center and prayer rooms become safe and comforting spaces where they can feel connected and supported.

Student C’s mention of the prayer room as a “sanctuary” points the importance of culturally and spiritually inclusive spaces. Meanwhile, both students’ appreciation for the international student center reflects its role in promoting peer support and easing the emotional burden of being far from home. These experiences align with the findings of Rico et al. (2021), who emphasized that international students in the Philippines benefit significantly from accessible and culturally responsive support services, including counseling, academic consultations, and community-building initiatives.

Recent studies reinforce the importance of emotional and academic support in enhancing international students’ well-being and performance. Lobo (2023) found that emotional support—particularly from instructors and institutional services—significantly boosts academic resilience and student engagement in higher education settings in the Philippines. The study emphasized that when students feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to persevere through academic challenges and remain motivated.

Similarly, San and Guo (2023) demonstrated that institutional and social support positively influence international students’ academic adaptation and performance. Their research showed that emotional and academic support services act as mediators, helping students adjust to new academic environments and ultimately succeed. These findings are echoed in the work of Martirosyan et al. (2019), who noted that international students who regularly engage with support services report higher satisfaction, stronger academic outcomes, and better emotional well-being.

### **Suggestions for Enhancing Support Services**

International students offered several thoughtful suggestions for improving their university experience. They emphasize the importance of a proactive International Student

Affairs (ISA) office, enriched orientation and cultural immersion activities, and initiatives to boost confidence in English communication.

Student A emphasized the role of the International Student Affairs (ISA) office, stating, *“I think it can be addressed in the ISA since they are the one in charge for the foreigner students.”* Student B recommended *“more orientation and cultural immersion activities”* and requested the university to *“encourage students to confidently express themselves in English.”* Student C echoed similar sentiments, suggesting the need to *“enhance orientation programs and cultural orientations”* and to *“empower international students to be more active in school activities.”* These insights reflect a shared desire for more structured, inclusive, and empowering support systems.

These suggestions highlight three key areas for improvement: (1) strengthening the role of the International Student Affairs office, (2) expanding orientation and cultural immersion programs, and (3) promoting language confidence and student engagement. Student A’s comment points to the need for a more proactive and visible ISA office that not only manages administrative concerns but also advocates for student welfare. Students B and C’s emphasis on orientation and cultural immersion stresses the importance of early and ongoing support in helping international students adjust socially and academically.

Orientation programs are critical for setting expectations, building community, and easing the transition into a new academic culture. Cultural immersion activities, meanwhile, help bridge the gap between international and local students, encouraging mutual understanding and reducing social isolation. Encouraging English communication and active participation in school activities also empowers international students to integrate more fully into campus life.

These student-driven suggestions are well-supported by recent research. Rico et al. (2021) emphasized that Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) must enhance their academic and socio-cultural support services for internationally mobile students. Their study found that best practices included structured orientation programs, peer mentoring, and cultural exchange activities that promote inclusivity and engagement. The researchers also noted that institutional responsiveness—such as the presence of a dedicated international student office—was key to improving student satisfaction and retention.

Similarly, Onosu (2021) explored the impact of cultural immersion experiences on students’ identity and adjustment. The study found that guided cultural immersion programs significantly enhanced students’ self-awareness, intercultural competence, and sense of belonging. These findings support the call for more intentional and reflective cultural activities as part of the international student experience.

In a more recent study, Ellis et al. (2024) examined how international students adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that structured support systems, including orientation and cultural programming, played a vital role in helping students navigate uncertainty and build resilience. The study emphasized that cultural adaptation is not automatic—it requires institutional effort and student-centered programming.

### **Cultural Diversity's Impact on Campus Environment and Student Experience**

Cultural diversity on university campuses has emerged as a critical element shaping not only the educational framework but also the social dynamics and overall student experience. As institutions increasingly welcome students from varied cultural, ethnic, and national backgrounds, the campus environment transforms into a vibrant space fostering intercultural learning, empathy, and mutual respect. The succeeding discussions will present the impact of cultural diversity on campus environment and student experience.

### **Cultural Diversity Promotes Understanding and Bonding**

The data gathered from the verbal responses of students regarding cultural diversity's impact on the campus environment and student experience reveals a strong consensus that cultural diversity significantly promotes understanding and bonding among students. Student A emphasizes how cultural diversity facilitates meaningful interactions between international and local Filipino students, noting, *"It let us as international students to bond more with Filipino students"* and *"Let us learn and understand more about their culture."* This statement highlights the dual role of cultural diversity in fostering interpersonal connections and serving as an educational bridge that allows students to acquire knowledge about traditions, values, and social norms different from their own. The importance of such intercultural learning aligns with Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), which posits that structured intercultural contact under optimal conditions reduces prejudice and promotes positive relations between diverse groups.

Similarly, Student B points out that cultural diversity *"creates opportunities for local and international students to coexist peacefully and respectfully,"* emphasizing not just the aspect of learning but also the establishment of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. This assertion underscores the instrumental role of campus diversity in cultivating social environments where respect for differences is normative. The concept of multiculturalism, as discussed in Berry's Acculturation Framework (1997), supports this perspective, suggesting that when individuals retain their cultural identities while participating in the larger society, integration is optimized, leading to peaceful and respectful coexistence.

Student C further echoes the sentiment of mutual learning and harmonious living by stating, *"We learn from each other, it gives everyone a chance to live together in harmony despite cultural differences."* This reflects the recognition that cultural diversity does not merely exist as a background feature but actively contributes to a lived experience where harmony is possible through reciprocal understanding. It also resonates with Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which highlights the social context as crucial for cognitive development, implying that diverse social interactions can enhance learning and personal growth.

Collectively, these responses corroborate existing literature emphasizing that cultural diversity in higher education settings fosters a dynamic environment conducive to social cohesion and intercultural competence development. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin's (2002) influential study found that students exposed to diverse peers experience greater critical thinking, cultural awareness, and the ability to engage in democratic citizenship. This further illustrates how the presence of cultural diversity on campus is not merely a demographic fact but a catalyst for positive educational and social outcomes.

Moreover, Campuses that actively promote intercultural dialogue and integration can mitigate ethnic enclaves and social isolation often experienced by international students, as noted in studies by Andrade (2006) and Smith and Khawaja (2011). The recognition of cultural diversity as a bridge for bonding, as remarked by Student A, positions diversity as a resource rather than a barrier, fostering inclusivity and collective resilience. The mutual benefits described in these responses also align with Kim's (2001) theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, which suggests that successful adaptation occurs through ongoing interaction and negotiation of cultural meanings, leading to increased cultural intelligence and emotional well-being.

### **Enrichment through Shared Cultural Activities and Events**

The data derived from student verbal responses about enrichment through shared cultural activities and events reveal the profound role that such engagements play in enhancing the campus experience and fostering a sense of community among diverse student populations.

Student A highlights the value of “*outreach activities and campus activities to share their culture together,*” pointing to the intentional creation of spaces where students can actively exchange cultural knowledge and practices. This emphasis on shared cultural events underscores the experiential learning that occurs outside formal classroom settings, enabling students to engage with cultural diversity in vibrant and participatory ways. Such approaches reflect principles from Dewey’s experiential learning theory (1938), which posits that learning is most meaningful when rooted in active participation and reflection within real-life contexts.

Student B corroborates this, describing participation in outreach activities as “*a truly meaningful experience,*” and mentioning specific examples such as the “*SCJPS Day and Night and the Intramurals.*” These named events appear to serve as institutionalized occasions that celebrate cultural diversity while fostering social interaction and campus spirit. The student’s recognition of these activities confirms that structured cultural programming is instrumental in promoting inclusivity and intercultural dialogue. This finding aligns with the concept of “cultural capital” delineated by Bourdieu (1986), where such events are not only social but educational capital, enriching students’ cultural competencies and social networks.

Furthermore, Student C’s personal testimony further illuminates the individual empowerment and affirmation that participation in these cultural events can facilitate. By stating that they “*represented the international student community as their muse during the intramurals, boosting my confidence and sense of belonging,*” the student reveals how cultural inclusivity within institutional events promotes identity validation and psychological well-being. The enhancement of self-esteem and belonging described aligns closely with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), particularly the social belongingness and esteem needs, which are critical for motivation and academic success. The student’s role as a representative or muse during a major event signifies recognition and integration, critical factors in combating feelings of marginalization commonly faced by minority or international students as emphasized in Tinto’s model of student retention (1993).

This synthesis of student responses is supported by broader empirical literature demonstrating the positive impact of culturally oriented shared activities on campus cohesion and student engagement. Banks (2009) argues that multicultural education strategies, which include cultural celebrations and community outreach, foster inclusivity and empower students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, research by Deardorff (2006) highlights that intercultural competence is often developed through experiential opportunities, such as participating in culturally rich events, which promote empathy, respect, and communication skills.

Moreover, the activities referenced, such as the intramurals and community outreach, serve dual functions: they act as platforms for cultural expression and as mechanisms for social integration (Museus & Quaye, 2009). By engaging students in cooperative and competitive settings centered around cultural appreciation, campuses utilize social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to bridge intergroup differences, reinforcing a shared campus identity while honoring individual cultural uniqueness. The positive psychological outcomes reported by Student C underscore the importance of visibility and recognition within campus culture, directly contributing to students’ sense of belonging and academic persistence (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings related to the first objective demonstrate that cultural diversity on campus significantly promotes understanding, bonding, and respect among students. Students reported that interactions between international and local Filipino peers enable meaningful cultural

exchange and mutual learning, helping them to appreciate differences while coexisting peacefully. In essence, cultural diversity transforms the campus into a space where empathy and social cohesion are nurtured, enhancing the overall student experience.

Regarding the second objective, the findings reveal that participation in shared cultural activities and events enriches students' college life by creating opportunities for cultural expression, community building, and personal empowerment. Students emphasized the value of outreach programs, cultural celebrations like SCJPS Day and Night, and intramurals, which serve as inclusive platforms for intercultural dialogue and social integration. Such events not only bolster intercultural competence but also satisfy fundamental psychological needs for belonging and recognition, as noted by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The data align with literature on experiential learning and social identity, underscoring how structured cultural programming enhances confidence, peer connection, and retention among diverse student populations.

Lastly, the third objective highlights that cultural diversity combined with institutional support through cultural events contributes substantially to a vibrant, inclusive campus environment and a positive student experience. Students gain both academic and emotional benefits from these engagements, which promote not only intercultural understanding but also personal growth, identity affirmation, and peer support.

### **Conclusions**

The interactions between international and local students do more than increase cultural knowledge; they facilitate a deeper respect and empathy that contribute to peaceful coexistence. This suggests that diversity is not simply a demographic characteristic but an active force that enriches social dynamics and personal growth, affirming theoretical perspectives on intercultural contact and acculturation.

Further, it can be concluded that shared cultural activities and events serve as essential vehicles for enriching the campus experience, promoting cultural expression, and strengthening community ties. By participating in organized cultural events, students not only develop intercultural competencies but also experience enhanced psychological well-being through recognition and social belonging. This inference underscores the critical role of experiential learning and inclusive programming in helping diverse students feel valued and integrated, which are key factors for retention and academic success.

Finally, the combined influence of cultural diversity and active institutional support through cultural programming substantially enhances the overall student experience. The presence of these opportunities facilitates not only academic adjustment but also emotional resilience and identity affirmation among international students. This reinforces the necessity for universities to maintain deliberate, culturally responsive initiatives that support intercultural dialogue and student engagement, ensuring an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to both personal and educational development.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The school is encouraged to develop and enforce language guidelines for instructors to minimize the use of local dialects during lectures, ensuring English remains the primary medium of instruction. Monitor compliance through periodic classroom observations and student feedback surveys every semester.

2. The school may introduce structured, mandatory orientation sessions and ongoing cultural workshops that facilitate interaction between local and international students. Measure participation rates and student satisfaction annually to ensure effectiveness.

3. There is a need to organize academic scheduling so that international students are grouped into consistent cohorts to promote peer bonding and ease academic adjustment. Track student retention and academic performance before and after implementation to evaluate impact.

4. It is encouraged to launch an outreach campaign utilizing multilingual materials and peer mentoring to inform all international students about available academic, counseling, and wellness resources. Assess awareness and utilization through surveys conducted twice yearly.

5. The school may conduct regular workshops on religious and cultural awareness to reduce bullying and insensitivity on campus.

6. The university may expand facilities such as prayer rooms and international student centers, ensuring they are accessible and welcoming. Collect user feedback quarterly to guide improvements and assess utilization.

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