A Cross-University Qualitative Study on the Academic Experiences of International Students. Research Report

UNIVERSITÀ PER IL BENESSERE PSICOLOGICO: dalla prevenzione all'intervento (UNIBEN-PI). Il progetto PROBEN.

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Questo volume è stato realizzato con il finanziamento del Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca nell'ambito dell'Avviso Proben.

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Dicembre 2025

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1 Introduction

The internationalization of universities is seen as a key approach to fostering knowledge development and enhancing universities' ability to address the challenges of an increasingly globalized world. While international exchange has historically been vital to scientific progress—driven by dialogue and knowledge sharing—it has recently become intertwined with economic and demographic factors that have encouraged Italian universities to expand their global engagement (OECD, 2025).

The number of internationally mobile students continues to rise globally, reaching approximately 4.6 million across OECD countries in 2022 (OECD, 2025). In this context, Italy hosts between 95,000 and 100,000 international students, highlighting its moderate yet stable role in the global higher education landscape. This number could further increase due to recent restrictive immigration policies in other countries, such as those implemented in the United States during the Trump administration.

Current national higher education policies recognized internationalization as a strategic priority (MUR, 2024).

Beyond short-term mobility initiatives like Erasmus, Italy has significantly expanded the number of degree programs offered entirely or partially in English, making its higher education system more accessible to non-Italian-speaking students. According to the CRUI (2019), around 400 such programs are currently available. Additionally, international students in Italy can benefit from scholarships provided by the government, universities, and international organizations, including targeted initiatives for refugees. As a result, Italian universities are undergoing a broader transformation, placing diversity and internationalization at the core of their missions.

Given the increased investment in attracting international students, it is essential to assess the equity in the quality of academic experiences offered and determine how institutions create supportive and inclusive environments. This aligns with the Health-Promoting Universities framework (Tsouros et al., 1998), which emphasizes that Universities play a crucial role not only in fostering learning but also in promoting conditions that sustain health and well-being. In addition, according to the principle of equity in education, universities should actively remove barriers to participation and ensure that all students have fair access to opportunities, resources, and support systems that enable them to realize their potential and maintain well-being within the university context (UNESCO, 2023).

Stemming from these principles, this study adopts a critical multilevel psychological framework, integrating ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to examine the academic well-being of international students across individual, interpersonal, institutional, and sociopolitical levels. While international research has increasingly explored stress and well-being among international students, the literature remains fragmented and limited (Guo & Chase, 20211; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Moreover, empirical research in Italy is particularly scarce (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Rudakova & Lal, 2025). As Oduway et al. (2023) emphasize, more research is needed in non-English-speaking contexts, where international students may face unique challenges related to linguistic, cultural, and social integration. The few available Italian studies, though valuable, have primarily focused on single university case studies (Celick et al., 2023; Matera et al., 2016), leaving a broader understanding of the system underdeveloped. This study, conducted as part of the ProBen Project – "Universities for Psychological Well-being: from Prevention to Intervention (UNIBEN-PI)" – funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities and involving eight higher education institutions, aims to advance knowledge of international students' experiences. While recent studies have begun to highlight positive mental health experiences (Rudakova & Lal, 2025; Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025), our approach goes beyond a purely positive focus by critically examining the conditions that enable or hinder well-being in everyday academic life. We aim to provide a nuanced understanding that can inform more equitable and inclusive university policies and practices across the higher education system.

In the following sections, we introduce our lens for understanding the well-being of international students and describe the primary risk factors and resources.

1.1 A Critical Understanding of International Students' Well-Being

International students are defined, for statistical purposes, as individuals who have crossed a national border for educational purposes and are currently enrolled in an institution outside their country of origin (UNESCO, 2015). From a psychological perspective, however, being an international student involves a complex life transition associated with both academic demands and migration.

In recent years, concerns about academic well-being have emerged within the broader context of the "mental health crisis" in higher education. University students occupy a transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood—a period characterized by opportunities for personal and professional growth but also by heightened psychological vulnerability (World Health Forum, 1997; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2020). Research consistently reports elevated rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among university students, alongside increasing inequalities that affect these outcomes (Capone et al., 2020; Dietz et al., 2020). The World Health Organization estimates that about 20% of students are at high risk of developing psychological disorders, which can significantly impact their academic performance and persistence (Corney et al., 2024). Scholars further note that students are situated within an academic environment shaped by neoliberal transformations. Over the past two decades, higher education reforms have intensified study demands, emphasized employability and performance metrics, and framed students as self-managing consumers of education (Wulf-Andersen & Larsen, 2020). This focus on individual responsibility heightens performance pressure, putting students who do not follow linear or accelerated trajectories at risk of marginalization.

Within this context, international students face additional challenges that may further affect well-being. Evidence from different countries presents a mixed picture. Some studies report no significant differences between international and domestic students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Ladum, 2019), while others identify international students as particularly vulnerable (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Sun et al., 2021). In the United Kingdom, more than one-third of international students report poor mental health (Atack, 2018; Kennedy, 2018), and in Australia, 41% report elevated stress levels (Russell et al., 2010; Hunley, 2010). Across Europe, increased dropout rates and higher levels of anxiety and depression—particularly during the first year abroad—have been documented (King et al., 2023; Prado et al., 2024). Conversely, some research indicates that international students report fewer mental health problems than domestic peers (LaMontagne et al., 2023), highlighting the heterogeneity of this population.

Despite growing attention, the literature remains fragmented. As Rudakova and Lal (2025) note, research has yet to clarify the complex interplay of factors that influence the psychological and social well-being of international students. Empirical studies are limited, often treating international students as a homogeneous group and overlooking variations across cultural backgrounds and institutional contexts. Furthermore, international students are frequently underrepresented due to language barriers and limited integration into university networks (Qin, 2021).

Most existing research has traditionally approached international student experiences through an adaptation or assimilation framework, emphasizing how well individuals adjust to their host environment. While informative, this perspective risks placing the burden of adjustment solely on the student, overlooking structural and institutional barriers that affect integration processes (Mwangi & Yao, 2021).

Finally, framing international students merely as a vulnerable group can obscure the agency, resilience, and resources they bring to academic life (Deuchar, 2021). Much of the literature focuses on difficulties and risk factors, paying less attention to the strengths and coping strategies that support well-being. This study aims to address this gap by examining how international students cope with challenges and mobilize resources.

1.2 Risk factors for international student well-being

The factors influencing the well-being of international students stem from the intersection of challenges related to migration, academic demands, and the transition to adulthood. Most existing research has focused on the socio-cultural processes involved in entering a host society, highlighting students' interactions with new lifestyles, institutional systems, and social norms. This focus has often been framed through the concept of acculturative stress—a concept that deserves critical examination, as it tends to place the burden of difficulties on individuals rather than on the structures that foster exclusion or inequality. Other research also emphasizes the role of marginalization in shaping these experiences Lee and Rice (2007).

In reviewing the critical factors, it is pertinent to note— as widely documented in the literature— that the first year of study abroad constitutes a particularly vulnerable period, during which experiences of disorientation and homesickness are frequently reported (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Loneliness, moreover, is identified as a pervasive challenge among international students; it arises not merely from individual shortcomings but is also shaped by structural and relational conditions, including limited social inclusion, language hierarchies, and subtle forms of discrimination (de Araujo, 2011). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that international students often have smaller social networks and lower levels of institutional and peer support compared to domestic students. Linguistic hierarchies and experiences of discrimination

frequently hinder their participation in academic and social communities. While proficiency in the host language is positively correlated with feelings of belonging (Yeh & Inose, 2003), many students report experiencing stress and alienation due to linguistic and cultural exclusion. Those studying in non-English-speaking countries face additional challenges, as they must navigate not only a new academic culture but also a foreign linguistic and social environment. Communicating outside the classroom often becomes a source of anxiety and symbolic exclusion (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020). Furthermore, processes of racialization significantly influence experiences of marginalization. Comparative studies show that Asian students report higher levels of social exclusion and acculturative stress than their European peers (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

The academic experience is considered another major source of stress for international students, as they must navigate unfamiliar teaching practices, assessment methods, and curricular structures (Alavi & Mansor, 2011). Language barriers further hinder students' academic engagement and participation, particularly when institutional support—such as orientation programs and academic advising—is limited. These findings align with previous research underscoring the importance of structured institutional support in fostering effective internationalization (Montgomery, 2010; Arkoudis & Baik, 2014). Students also report challenges in communicating with lecturers, engaging in class discussions, and building relationships with domestic peers. Many students find it easier to connect with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds (Elturki et al., 2019; Jenkins & Galloway, 2009). In some instances, they feel excluded or perceive that preferential treatment is being given to domestic students by the teaching staff (Alavi & Mansor, 2011).

Challenges extend beyond the university environment and into students' material living conditions. Housing is frequently cited as a major source of distress, with students facing high rents, unsafe living situations, conflicts with roommates, and, at times, exploitation or discrimination by landlords (Corney et al., 2024). Financial insecurity remains a significant issue, as international students often face high living expenses, tuition fees, and limited access to part-time employment due to legal and social barriers (Oduwaye et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2019). Finally, recent research has identified significant barriers to accessing mental health services. These barriers are not solely linguistic or cultural but are often structural, reflecting systems that are inadequately responsive to diversity (Corney et al., 2024).

1.3 Protective factors for international student well-being

Research has shown that international students embark on their academic journeys abroad for various reasons and with diverse expectations of personal, educational, and professional benefits. Studying abroad can offer enriching learning and life experiences (Bilecen et al., 2023), yet motivations for mobility are far from homogeneous. Fakunle (2021) identifies four main motivational dimensions—educational, aspirational, experiential, and economic—reflecting students' pursuit of academic excellence, professional advancement, and personal growth. At the same time, structural constraints such as limited educational opportunities or restrictive political and social contexts in countries of origin also shape these decisions (Bhandari et al., 2018). Quantitative research on international students' adjustment has largely emphasized individual protective factors as predictors of well-being and successful adaptation. Traits such as language proficiency, intercultural competence, and psychological capital have been consistently linked to improved academic and psychosocial outcomes (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025). However, this emphasis on individual resources risks obscuring the relational and contextual dimensions of adaptation.

As highlighted in recent systematic reviews, situational resources—such as social support, social connectedness, positive intergroup contact, and the use of social media to maintain ties and share experiences—play a pivotal role in facilitating intercultural adaptation (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025). Qualitative research offers a more nuanced picture, revealing the dynamic ways in which students negotiate challenges and actively construct resources for well-being. Rather than passive recipients of support, international students demonstrate agency and resilience: they build informal peer networks, adopt flexible learning strategies, and seek guidance from trusted academic staff. For instance, despite facing cultural and academic barriers, Chinese students have been found to cultivate resilience through community building, peer collaboration, and help-seeking behaviors (Almonte-Acosta, 2010). The institutional context also emerges as a crucial determinant of students' well-being. Universities that provide mentoring, culturally sensitive counselling, and opportunities for intercultural learning foster not only academic success but also a stronger sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Almonte-Acosta, 2010). Evidence from both Canada and Italy suggests that systems integrating informational support, mental health promotion, and intercultural competence development act as protective environments that enhance resilience and reduce inequities (Toimano et al.,

2025; Guo & Chase, 2011). In this perspective, higher education institutions are not merely sites of knowledge transmission but also social spaces where equity, inclusion, and psychological well-being can—and should—be cultivated.

2 Methods

2.1 Methodology and participants

To address the research questions, a focus group methodology was selected. This approach allows for the exploration of shared meanings, social interactions, and collective reflections among participants (Morgan, 1997). It is particularly well-suited for understanding the experiences of international students within the university context and for capturing their shared perceptions of university services and potential areas for improvement.

Prior to data collection, the research team met to design and refine the focus group protocol, ensuring alignment on the interview guide, prompts, and facilitation procedures to promote consistency across sessions. A convenience sampling strategy was adopted, involving voluntary participation of international students who responded to an invitation distributed through university offices and student residences. Preliminary meetings were conducted with representatives from both student associations and university residences to present the aims and procedures of the study. Additionally, flyers in English were distributed to encourage student participation. Invitations to participate were sent via email, in collaboration with university offices that support international students and student residence, as well as the directors of international programs. In all the universities, reaching the students has been challenging and takes some months to organize the focus group session. In a pair of universities, credits were recognized for participation to incentivize student involvement.

The study has been approved by the psychology department Committee for Research Evaluation (CRIP) RM-2025-917 in February 2025.

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the research. A total of ten focus groups were held, comprising 53 participants. Each focus group included between 3 and 7 participants. The educational backgrounds of the participants were varied: 19 were in Single-Cycle programs, 14 were pursuing master's degrees, 11 were enrolled in bachelor's degrees, and 6 were in PhD programs. The participants represented a diverse range of nationalities, with 20 from Asian countries, 11 from other European countries, 10 from African countries, 6 fm North America, 3 from South America. Overall, the group consisted of 33 female and 21 male participants.

The focus groups were conducted in English to minimize language barriers and were scheduled at times convenient for the students. They took place on campus and, in some cases, in university residences to enhance accessibility. Each meeting was facilitated by two researchers from the host university and lasted approximately two hours. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Using guided questions and visual prompts, the discussions aimed to explore the students' experiences as international learners, their perceptions of the challenges faced within the university context, their views on personal and social resources that may enhance adaptation and well-being, as well as potential areas for institutional improvement where supportive interventions could be enacted within the framework of the project.

2.2 Thematic Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and managed using NVivo 11 software. All recordings from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and subjected to repeated readings to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. An initial coding framework was established by identifying significant units of text relevant to the research questions. The analytic process adhered to the six phases of thematic analysis, which included familiarization with the data, the generation of initial codes, the search for themes, the review and refinement of those themes, and the final definition and naming of each theme. This thematic development was characterized by an iterative and reflexive approach, facilitating continuous engagement with the entire dataset, coded extracts, and emerging conceptual patterns. Themes were identified through a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning, reflecting both the voices of participants and the theoretical framework guiding the study. Particular attention was paid to new and unexpected insights that arose across different focus groups, leading to the creation of new categories until a stable thematic configuration was established. The analysis also incorporated principles from the constant

comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), involving systematic comparisons both within and between focus groups, as well as across emerging categories and theoretical concepts. This method enabled the organization of data into several central thematic areas, each comprising multiple subthemes that captured complementary and transversal aspects of participants' experiences. The writing of the thematic narrative was a reflexive practice, necessitating critical examination and refinement of themes to ensure a coherent and grounded representation of the data (Patton, 2002). Quotations illustrative of each theme were carefully selected to reflect the participants' perspectives. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the analysis was conducted collaboratively among the research team. Regular peer-debriefing sessions were organized to review coding strategies, address discrepancies, and refine theme interpretations, aligning with the quality criteria proposed by Barbour (2001).

3 Results

The findings highlight how international students actively navigate a complex landscape of challenges and resources throughout their academic experience. On the one hand, students confront difficulties in building peer relationships, often experiencing social isolation and loneliness, and encounter barriers to equitable access to academic opportunities and employment pathways. They also manage significant economic and academic pressures, closely linked to concerns about academic performance and future professional prospects, while simultaneously negotiating increasing autonomy in daily life, which can intensify stress levels.

On the other hand, students also mobilize a range of personal, relational, and institutional resources. They engage in experiential and transformative learning processes, described as a form of active or lived learning, through which they develop new skills, perspectives, and forms of self-efficacy. The strength of interpersonal relationships—with peers, co-nationals, and, in some cases, faculty—emerges as a key protective factor, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional support. Additionally, students draw on academic and social resources within and beyond the university to sustain their well-being and support their educational progress.

These interconnected challenges and resources are explored in depth in the following sections, which illustrate how international students actively shape their academic and personal experiences within the university context.

3.1 Difficulties in studying and living abroad

3.1.1 Feeling on the Margins: Difficulties in Building Peer Relationships

Across focus groups, participants consistently described substantial difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships with peers—particularly with local students. These challenges were accompanied by a pervasive sense of isolation and loneliness, often intensified by geographical distance from family networks and long-standing friendships. As one student explained, *"international students mostly feel it, because we are separated from our home, from our family and here."* Holiday periods proved to be particularly challenging, as students experienced acute homesickness both during breaks in Italy—when university spaces were largely deserted—and during festive occasions in their countries of origin, where the absence of familial celebration rendered feelings of longing especially pronounced.

Students frequently attributed these relational obstacles to linguistic barriers. Many arrived with little or no knowledge of Italian, and the process of learning or using the language generated anxiety about misunderstanding and fear of negative judgment, which in turn limited their willingness to engage socially. Participants described how linguistic distance made it difficult for them to feel comfortable, fully participate in informal conversations, or perceive themselves as genuinely part of the student community. These challenges were compounded by cultural differences in communication styles, lifestyle expectations, and the existence of pre-established social circles among Italian students. For example, this students told us:

"Sometimes I talk in English, but I don't feel myself really blunt here in Italy, 100%, because even some colleagues do some jokes about Italian culture, or even singers that I don't know that they are talking these things, sometimes I feel strange."

Another widely shared perception was that local students tended to remain within cohesive in-groups and showed limited openness toward interacting with international peers. Participants noted a reluctance among Italian students to converse in English or to engage with newcomers they did not already know, contributing to the formation of parallel and largely non-overlapping social networks. This dynamic was also observed

within international degree programs, where interactions were theoretically expected to be more fluid. A similar pattern emerged in student residences, where conversations frequently took place exclusively in Italian, making informal socialization difficult for those unable to follow the language. In more extreme cases, students reported experiencing profound loneliness, often remaining isolated in their rooms.

Students reflected on the factors shaping their social experiences, at times questioning whether setbacks in forming relationships were influenced by prejudice or discriminatory attitudes. One participant highlighted the interpretive ambiguity inherent in such experiences:

"When you try once, you try twice, and you feel you're being rejected… at first I would consider it something directed towards my race… but little by little I understood it's more of the fast-paced life in Milan that makes everyone too busy." Others highlighted how competitive academic climates further constrained opportunities for relationship building: *"My colleagues are kind of competitive, really competitive… in business they did not integrate international students; for example, in group work they made their groups and left us alone."* Certain academic and demographic contexts—such as engineering programs, solitary PhD work, or age differences within cohorts—were perceived as intensifying social marginality. Also, students from countries experiencing armed conflict, such as Russia or Israel, also tend to be more reluctant to engage in relationships due to fear of prejudice.

Taken together, these experiences reveal a cumulative process in which linguistic barriers, cultural distance, established social structures, and competitive academic environments intersect to limit international students' opportunities for connection. For many, the result was a sense of being socially peripheral— *"cut off" from university life* and unable to access the forms of belonging that underpin a supportive academic experience.

3.1.2 Navigating an Unfamiliar Academic System: barriers to equal access in academic resources

Difficulties in navigating the academic environment emerged as a central theme, generating considerable uncertainty, disorientation, and emotional distress among international students. Participants described encountering structural and procedural barriers that impeded their ability to understand how the university system operates and to access institutional resources effectively. These obstacles were perceived as symptoms of an academic context insufficiently equipped to address the heterogeneous needs of an international student population, thereby reinforcing feelings of exclusion and institutional invisibility.

A recurrent concern involved the limited clarity, accessibility, and consistency of institutional communication. Students described an absence of supportive channels through which they could seek guidance when encountering academic or administrative difficulties. Several expressed a profound sense of abandonment: *"I don't think anybody cares if I pass or understand anything. No one tries to understand what we go through as international students. I was honestly shocked when someone finally asked about our experience, because I didn't think anybody cared. I'm failing two years in a row—not because I'm stupid, I know I'm not—but I'm still failing."*

In private universities, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with services that fell below their expectations, particularly with regard to language courses, which were often perceived as insufficient or poorly structured.

Many students emphasized the need for more systematic support with administrative procedures, including visa renewals, residence permits, access to the healthcare system, and other bureaucratic processes that depend heavily on language proficiency and familiarity with institutional procedures. Some also pointed to significant gaps in career guidance services, noting that existing provisions did not adequately meet the needs of international students navigating unfamiliar academic and professional environments, which were perceived as poorly suited to the realities of international students. Participants noted the scarcity of internship opportunities and employment pathways accessible to those who do not speak Italian, reporting similar difficulties in securing curricular placements: services and partner institutions were described as largely unprepared or unwilling to accommodate non-Italian-speaking trainees.

Beyond administrative complexity, students faced challenges adapting to the organisational and pedagogical characteristics of the Italian university system. Language barriers further complicated the interpretation of academic expectations. Students reported missing essential deadlines or procedural requirements because information was fragmented, ambiguous, or available only in Italian. One participant recounted being unable to sit an exam simply because they had not understood the need to register for the exam session. In some

cases, participants described experiences they perceived as discriminatory or reflective of differential treatment based on their status as foreigners. The focus groups also revealed that programmes formally labelled as "international" often lacked substantive intercultural or preparatory components, functioning instead as standard degree programmes delivered in English. Some students also felt that lecturers were not sufficiently equipped to manage intercultural classroom contexts, noting that instructors occasionally failed to take students' diverse educational and cultural backgrounds into account when designing courses or evaluating performance.

This exacerbated students' difficulties adapting to assessment formats, workloads, and pedagogical expectations that contrasted sharply with those of their previous educational systems. The oral examination format was a particularly salient source of anxiety, especially for students who had never encountered it before. A medical student described: *"Everyone here seemed to handle the first exams so well—including oral exams, which I had never experienced before. Even after three years in Italy, I still struggle. That's me with my coffee, trying to survive another exam session."* Clinical placements in hospital settings represented another delicate transition, with students reporting feelings of disadvantage linked to the attitudes and expectations of supervising staff. Several students described university environments where social and extracurricular life were perceived as marginal or inaccessible, undermining opportunities for belonging and further reinforcing their sense of isolation.

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3.1.3 Pressures for Academic Achievement and Professional Success

Students' accounts revealed that their migration projects are deeply rooted in the expectation of academic success, which they perceive as the primary pathway to securing a better professional future. This centrality of achievement renders moments of difficulty—academic, financial, or personal—not merely challenging but destabilising, as they threaten the very purpose of their mobility and the meaning assigned to their efforts. As one participant expressed, *"I chose this one because, well, I often feel lost, especially when it comes to what I study and how I study it. I do like, it feels like I am the one who is putting those roads and finding like, finding a map and deciding on how to live and what to do and kind of creates a safe space for myself in a country where I don't know if I'm wanted and then and then studying something so hard and I sometimes I don't know if I, you know, if I'm doing the correct thing, if it is all worth it, kinda, and then all these questions and all these, I don't know, all these questions and the existence of this anxiety makes me feel a bit lost and clueless and scared as well (z, unimi)*

Students described how economic, academic, and professional domains intersect to create a pervasive and cumulative sense of pressure. For many, financial stability depends directly on strict academic performance requirements, such as maintaining the credit thresholds needed to retain DSU scholarships: *"If you don't meet the credits, you don't meet the scholarship; if you don't meet the scholarship, life gets difficult."* This interdependence reinforces a constant tension in which academic obligations take precedence over emotional needs and self-care: *"We can't treat ourselves during emotional breakdowns… our priority is education."*

Competitive dynamics within certain programmes—in particular, business and private-university contexts—further intensified students' difficulties and academic pressure. As one participant explained: *"There's this competition about who's the best, who has the best extracurriculars or research output. It makes everyone else worried and pressured into thinking they're not good enough."*

Feeling the weight of their own academic expectations, students frequently limited social engagement, channeling their energy toward studies rather than personal relationships.

Material conditions further contribute to students' sense of strain. In high-cost cities like Milan, concerns about rent, living expenses, and the scarcity of part-time jobs or internships accessible to non-Italian speakers intensified feelings of precarity. One participant explained: *"I can't find an internship or a part-time job in Milan… I'm really concerned about financial problems in the future."* Even in contexts with lower living costs, limited opportunities for international students amplified uncertainty about the future. Family expectations also played a central role in shaping students' perceived responsibilities, adding an additional layer of emotional and moral pressure: *"I have a burden to carry… I have to gain something from my stay here."*

Concerns about employability were frequent among the senior students, especially among those studying in fields where post-graduation opportunities seemed limited without Italian proficiency. Some students

expressed growing doubts about the value of their efforts: *"I study hard, but sometimes I'm like… is this worth it?"* Others voiced a lack of confidence in their ability to build a future in Italy: *"I don't feel really hopeful that I'm going to find a job here."*

Across accounts, professional uncertainty, economic vulnerability, and the challenge of meeting academic demands were experienced as interlocking pressures that shaped not only students' future orientations but also their daily emotional landscape.

3.1.4 Building Autonomy under Conditions of Uncertainty and Exclusion

Another salient theme concerns the experience of managing multiple life domains autonomously while residing in a foreign country. Participants described this condition as a continual process of coordination and decision-making across academic, administrative, financial, and personal spheres. This process frequently exposes them to ambiguity, as ordinary tasks must be carried out without the cultural cues, institutional familiarity, or relational support that would typically guide such activities in their home contexts. For some students, the central challenge lies in the pervasive sense of uncertainty that accompanies these responsibilities.

It looks like she's been dropped off in the middle of nowhere. And has to figure out where to go. I felt like this when I first arrived. And I kind of still feel like this now. Because I try not to say it in a negative way. It just feels like a lot of things. You have to figure out yourself. There's no assistance from others. Either you know it, or it won't get done. So a lot of times I've had to Google. I've had to ask other Italian friends…..So it's just like, I don't know which direction. Every day it's just like, okay, where am I to push me next to? So this is why I chose this one. I came with my suitcases, just like this.

For others, the emphasis falls on the emotional weight of maintaining responsibilities in the host country while remaining connected—practically and symbolically—to obligations and relationships in their country of origin.

"Well, I don't have much to tell, but I'll try. This picture is because here, in my home country, I had some responsibilities. When I arrived, I had a difficult time. Of course, there's a new environment, new culture, new people. And of course, you have to work with the studies, work and everything. You have to balance them. And back home, I was responsible for so many things. So it was like the responsibility was burdening us. Okay, I have to do this, this, this, and everything."

A recurring experience during the initial period of settlement is a pronounced sense of overload due to the multitude of procedures that must be undertaken. Bureaucratic requirements, particularly those related to residence permits and access to the healthcare system, were consistently identified as particularly arduous. These processes were described as opaque, fragmented across different institutional actors, and demanding in terms of time and cognitive effort. As previously noted, linguistic barriers further complicate students' capacity to engage with these systems, intensifying both the practical and emotional demands involved. Some participants also recounted episodes of disrespect or mistreatment by administrative staff, which contributed to heightened feelings of vulnerability and marginalisation.

"When I entered to the office I told I'm not speaking Italian, I just got here so the security staff was very helpful….so about 40 minutes later my name was called and then I went, there was another gentleman, he was screaming at me in Italian, so he didn't stop, so after few minutes I told him I'm not speaking Italian and then he started to yell again, I didn't understand a word he said and he went in and then another person told me he's calling me to counter 5 and then I went to counter 5, he was there and again he was screaming, I was really scared because it was a foreign country…"

Although the university years are often framed as a period of progressive autonomy acquisition. Autonomy is not developed gradually but rather imposed abruptly within a context characterised by institutional opacity and limited support. This accelerated and often solitary transition places substantial strain on students' emotional well-being and significantly shapes their broader experience.

4 Resources

Narratives collected from international students can be resumed in three main themes that describe resources at the personal level, relational and academic and social/community

4.1.1 Personal level: Live learning experience

Through the discussion, a prevailing theme is the students' deliberate effort to reframe obstacles as catalysts for personal learning and strength, clearly emphasizing that their primary resource is their capacity for positive reframing.

After coming to Italy, I think I lost the balance I had between my work and my life—my life and work balance. This loss has many reasons, for example, being far from our family, being far from our safe zone. I chose this photo because I want to be in peace. Although I have lost my peace, as I mentioned, I like this situation because I'm getting to be an experienced person. That's it."

The narratives reveal a profound process of self-authorship and transformative developmental growth as students navigate the challenges of academic mobility. Failures are interpreted as opportunities for growth, contributing to a sense of personal accomplishment. This shift is evident in their framing of the mobility experience as a deliberate evolution, in which difficulties are reframed as valuable internal resources, as reflected in comments such as: *"Along the way I've learned; I have changed my mentality, which is a good thing."*

The importance of approaching the experience as an active, agentic process emerges clearly in the strategies students describe for sustaining their well-being—moving forward through hope, selective attention, and emotional regulation. One participant explained: *"If something is not important, I forget and walk,"* while another emphasized maintaining *"hope that someday, one day, things will be fine."*

The experience abroad is also perceived as a major source of expanded opportunity, frequently described as a *"wide open image"* that offers *"another possibility—not one, but many,"* and as a concrete pathway for realizing long-held professional and personal aspirations. A significant source of satisfaction lies in the multicultural exchange, which broadens students' perspectives in meaningful ways: *"Here I can… I'm meeting everyone; I'm knowing those countries, I'm knowing their culture—each and everything."*

Finally, the narratives reveal a diverse set of self-care practices for actively managing well-being. These strategies extend beyond the academic sphere to include intellectual, spiritual, and physical practices. Students specifically reference structured methods like writing ("I keep a diary... to cope with stress"), meditation, and engaging in physical activity ("I like to walk, I like to run, I participate in some competitions, eating healthy"). Concurrently, spiritual beliefs are emphasized, with activities like "praying and being grateful every day" providing internal calm and grounding. Collectively, these practices suggest the students' proactive commitment to their own growth throughout their intense developmental journey.

4.1.2 Relational resources: building Meaningful Connections

The construction of a supportive social network emerges as a critical factor for the integration of international students. While narratives reflect the struggle of forging connections in a new linguistic or cultural contextthe peer network, once established, is deemed an indispensable resource. . This support system, which includes both local and fellow international students, is frequently described in powerful terms across student accounts: "For me, the friendship by itself here is like another degree. I value it," and is considered a "treasure" that offers essential support during "emotional breakdown or some hurdles." The peer group is so vital that, for some students, it takes on a familial role: "We are here, we are your family." These relationships also extend beyond academic settings, fostering intercultural development, as exemplified by one student's experience:

"*So also, life in school has not been very great because I would make a lot of friends, particularly in my class, and that sort of stuff. But apart from the school, outside, in the dormitory, I mean, in the city, I've made a lot of good friends, and [name], one of them, is one of my very good friends. And then we talk a lot about our countries, our food, our. Learned from a lot of different international students. So this has helped me to develop, to understand that life is beyond just what you think."*

Crucially, these examples highlight that successfully overcoming the initial isolation requires proactivity and student agency. The ability to take the initiative is identified as a critical factor in integration. One student highlights this agency by describing the necessary first step in building a communication platform: "I took the numbers of everyone and made the WhatsApp group. And this was an initiation that made me, like, a person to stand out." This effort allows them to "mingle up," ultimately leading to deeply rooted relationships: "now I have international friends, my local from Pakistan and Italians, like, now I have every number." Furthermore, the support system is enhanced through access to wider resources, including international student networks throughout Italy, the guidance provided by senior students who explain various things and provide support,

and participation in student associations. Micro-communities in residences also aid immersion, as another example illustrates:

"*But then, I think the magnifying glass for me also represents the importance of the little communities that I did find. So, in my residence, for example, making really close friends. And sharing meals. And being with other mostly international students in there. Has been a great way to share my experience. there are some Italians. So, sharing the culture and language. And getting immersed in that way."*

For many, the family remains a key reference point, and maintaining these contacts ("I call my family so much") serves as a crucial resource to overcome homesickness when immediate peer support is unavailable. Moreover, the process of establishing local connections fosters trust: "I felt like I cannot trust in anyone, but now I can trust. I have also friends from abroad, from my country, I keep in touch with them, so they are also a resource for me."

4.1.3 Academic and community resources

Students emphasize the importance of direct communication with staff, both in formal and informal contexts, such as post-class interactions or individual consultations. One student observed: "When I'm in class… at least this is where I can speak English. All the professors speak English very well… They ask me later how I'm doing, and then they discuss it there." This account illustrates that, while faculty accessibility may vary, specific interactions can provide meaningful support and foster inclusion. For students coming from more hierarchical or formal academic contexts, this accessibility is particularly valued. Some students also mentioned the availability of tutors and administrative staff as resources that foster a sense of inclusion, although linguistic barriers can occasionally limit their effectiveness. One student shared: "If you can somehow manage to write in Italian your problem, they do reach out… They have never left me unread or delivered. They will always come and get back to me, so that has been helpful."

Regarding the academic workload, students report mixed experiences. While some perceive high pressure in certain areas, others highlight the relative manageability of coursework and examinations. The absence of excessive stress is perceived as enhancing students' control over their academic progress: "*Education here is easy for me… Because the professors don't impose stress on you… If you cannot pass the first time, you can do second, third… If you don't like your score, you can try another one. The exam is very good. Here, education is really easier for me*."

Language resources also play a critical role. Although language courses may not always be mandatory, they are valued as tools for both linguistic development and social integration, particularly in face-to-face settings. Students appreciate environments in which faculty facilitate English-language communication and provide individualized attention, reinforcing their ability to engage fully with the academic community.

Finally, some students underscore the importance of ancillary services and infrastructure in supporting daily life and overall well-being. University residences, canteens, and recreational or sports facilities are consistently mentioned as resources that enhance students' experience and foster integration within the broader university context.

5 Discussion

The results of this study present a nuanced picture of international students' experiences, drawing on a diverse sample across universities with varying institutional characteristics, including both public and private institutions, and students with heterogeneous backgrounds and varying starting conditions.

Creating inclusive environments that alleviate challenges and support students' resources requires universities to actively collaborate with external actors, including municipal services and local associations. This collaboration can foster networks that provide both cultural and material benefits, promoting equity (Dell'Aversana & Bruno, 2021).

Our results suggest that to build inclusion, it is essential to consider the diversity of students' immigration backgrounds and stages of study, as well as the mechanisms of integration and discrimination that shape their lived experiences within this complex policy landscape.

Inclusion cannot be approached as a uniform or static process but must be understood through an intersectional lens that accounts for the stratification of students' immigration statuses and academic positions. Differences related to country of origin (including exposure to conflict and forced displacement), linguistic capital, legal categorisation (such as EU versus non-EU status), and migration pathways (e.g. refugee status,

age at arrival, or minor status) intersect with stages of study to produce differentiated access to rights, resources, and institutional support. These layered dimensions shape both mechanisms of integration and experiences of discrimination, which are embedded within a complex and hierarchically organised policy landscape.

While initial support is crucial, the findings underscore the importance of ongoing support during the final phase of students' academic journeys (Calonge et al., 2021). Unlike other OECD countries, Italy lacks a clearly defined post-study work permit, complicating the transition from university to the labor market.

From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for integrated, multi-level interventions. Experiential teaching methods that emphasize group work and reflection can foster essential soft skills, peer support, and inclusive classroom climates, thereby empowering all students. Ryan and Viete (2009) emphasize the importance of feelings of belonging, being valued as a person with knowledge, and communicating effectively, creatively, and with confidence.

Also, buddy programs can facilitate early social integration and reduce isolation (Wong et al., 2022). Faculty development initiatives focused on the specific needs of international students—such as flexible communication practices, additional learning materials, and dedicated advising time—can enhance academic support. Orientation services should include not only initial socialization and guidance into the academic system, but also structured support during the exit phase, including career orientation and information on post-graduation options.

This study has limitations that should be addressed in future research. Although the sample size was substantial, identifying subgroups based on shared challenges and resources could provide further insights. Moreover, participation was voluntary, potentially excluding students who are either particularly well integrated or experiencing more severe difficulties.

Overall, these findings underscore the need to foster more inclusive academic environments through coordinated, multi-level actions involving classrooms, faculty, administrative staff, and services dedicated to orientation and internationalization, in line with the Healthy Universities framework. They also challenge adaptation- and assimilation-based approaches that place primary responsibility for integration on international students, while overlooking structural and institutional barriers.

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