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# The Influence of Academic and Social Integration on Academic Performance for International and Local students, a cross-institutional comparison

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**Abstract:** A common belief among educators is that international students are insufficiently academically and socially adjusted to higher education. Recent research has found a mixed picture on whether international students underperform in academic and social integration and academic performance. Therefore, Morrison et al. (2005) argue that research should extend its focus to understanding the underlying reasons for these performance differences of international versus local students. In a cross-institutional comparison among 958 students of five business schools in the Netherlands, we investigated the differences in academic performance amongst local and international students by focussing on academic and social integration. Students' academic integration was measured with the Students' adaptation to college questionnaire (SACQ), while students' social integration was measured with a newly developed and validated questionnaire, the social integration questionnaire (SIQ, 4 factors, 15 items). The results indicated that students with a non-Western background are less integrated than Western students, have considerable lower academic and social integration scores and have (marginally) lower GPA and ECTS scores

## Introduction

An increasing number of students choose to study at a university away from their home country (EUROSTAT, s.d.). Next to the enriched, more international atmosphere at the host universities (Eringa & Huei-Ling, 2009; Van der Wende, 2003), there are some reservations among educators regarding the academic and social integration of international students. A common assumption in higher education is that academic integration, that is the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life (Tinto, 1975), of international students is not well aligned with the requirements of higher educational institutes (Asmar, 2005; Barrie, 2007; Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Métais, 2005). Recent research has found a mixed picture on whether international students underperform in academic integration and academic performance. Therefore, Morrison et al. (2005) argue that research should extend its focus on comparisons in performance of international versus local students to the underlying reasons for these differences.

According to Tinto (1975, 1998), students not only need to persist at university in order to graduate but they also need to participate in the student culture, both within and outside the immediate context of the learning environment. Severiens and Wolff (2008) found that students who feel at home, who are well connected to fellow-students and teachers and who take part in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate. In addition, Wilcox et al. (2005) found that social support by family and friends (i.e. social networks of students) has a positive influence on the study-success of first-year students. Having a sufficient number of friends, sharing accommodation with other students as well as contacts with the university staff can influence social integration. We define social integration as the extent to which students adapt to the social way-of-life at university. Recently, researchers are broadening the focus on academic integration and academic performance to the social integration of students (e.g. Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yazedjian & Toews, 2006). The goal of this paper is first to identify whether academic and social integration differs for local and international students. Second, we will assess whether differences in academic and social integration between local and international students also has an impact on study-success (GPA, ETCS).

## Academic Integration

In line with the model of Tinto's interactionist model (Tinto, 1998), Baker and Siryk (1999) have assessed that academic integration has a large influence on study performance. Baker and Siryk (1999) distinguish four concepts in academic integration, namely academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment and attachment. Academic adjustment refers to the degree of a student's success in coping with various educational demands such as motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment. Social adjustment on the other hand describes how well students deal with the interpersonal-societal demands of a study, such as working in groups. The scale personal and emotional adjustment indicates the psychological and physical level of distress experienced while adapting to the academic way-of-life. Finally, attachment reflects the degree of commitment to the educational-institutional goals. In a large number of studies in U.S. colleges, the four concepts of academic adjustment are positively related with study progress and study performance (Baker & Siryk, 1999).

## Social Integration

Current research indicates that institutes and the social networks of students have a large influence on how first-year students adjust (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Tinto, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2005). In the context of international students, based upon a literature review we have identified four factors, namely: perception of the faculty by the social network of students; social support by family and friends; social life; and ethnic background.

The perception of faculty, that is the perceived esteem of the faculty by family, friends, the general public and future employers, influences the social integration of students (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Thomas, 2002). For example Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) found that non-completing students had a lower compatibility with the institute, which was in part caused by less compatible social networks. Higher Educational Institutes are increasingly aware of impacts of ranking lists such as those published in the Financial Times on the choices that students make when selecting an educational programme. Therefore, HEI spend considerable effort in providing non-academic facilities to students (e.g. campus, ICT-facilities, social life, cultural programmes) in order to differentiate them from other institutes (Bok, 2003; Thomas, 2002). A HEI with a well-perceived reputation by the social network of the student is expected to have a positive influence on the persistence of study.

Wilcox et al. (2005) found that social support by family and friends has a strong influence on study-success of first-year students. In general, the role of the family on the attitudes and motivation of students has been consistently found in educational psychology (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Cokley, Bernard, Cunningham, & Motoike, 2001; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Students who drop out of higher education often state that social support networks provide insufficient support to continue (Christie et al., 2004; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998).

The social life outside of the academic environment has a strong influence on academic integration. Having a sufficient number of friends, sharing accommodation with other students, being member of a study association, student fraternity or sports club can influence social integration and academic performance (Bok, 2003; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). This allows students to become part of a social life that is closely attached to the university setting (Tinto, 1998).

Finally, research on cross-cultural differences has highlighted that both national and ethnic identity (Asmar, 2005; Eringa & Huei-Ling, 2009; Phinney, 1990; Yazedjian & Toews, 2006) influence how students learn in social networks. For example, Skyrme (2007) found that Chinese students who entered at a New Zealand university had significant transitional problems. Berry (1999, p. 40) defines the transitional challenges of students from two different cultures as acculturation, which is "the process of cultural change that results when two (or more) cultural groups come into contact with each other; the changes occur in both groups, but usually one (the dominant group) changes less than the other(s)". When international students and local students work and learn together, both have to make an effort to acculturate in order to be able to effectively work together. However, in our own research we found that German students differed significantly with respect to learning styles and study performance to Dutch students (Tempelaar, Rienties, & Gijsselaers, 2007). In addition, we found that local and international students live in separate social groups and therefore lead different social lives (Rienties, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, Kommers, & Nijhuis, 2010).

Finally, research on drop-out and retention indicates that financial constraints can have significant impact of study progress (Thomas, 2002). For example, 45% of the cohort investigated by Thomas (2002) indicated to have substantial financial concerns. Meeuwisse et al. (2010) found that non-completers from low social-economic backgrounds were more affected by problems in their home or personal situation, which is directly related to their financial situation and financial support by their social network. Based upon the academic and social integration

factors identified above, the following research questions will be addressed in order to assess whether international students' academic and social integration differs from local students and whether these differences have an influence on study-outcomes:

- To what extent is academic and social integration related to study performance?
- To what extent is the relationship of academic and social integration with study performance different for international students?

## Methods

### Setting and participants

In this research, academic and social integration will be compared among local and international students using a dataset that was composed from five business schools who offer business and economics programmes to first-year bachelor students in the Netherlands. The integrated questionnaire was distributed to 1887 students after 6-8 months of study among five Dutch business schools. Of the 1887 participants contacted, 958 completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 50.8%. In particular programs that have a significant portion of international and local students were taken into account, in order to be able to make direct comparisons on both the institute and the aggregate level. In total 79 nationalities and 129 ethnic identities were present in the database. Respondents were assured that their individual responses and particular institutions would not be identified in any published account of the results.

### Measures

*Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire.* Students' academic integration was measured by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1999), which consists of four scales: Academic adjustment (e.g. "I know why I am at this institute and what I want out of it", 24 items), Social adjustment (e.g. "I am meeting as many people and making as many friends as I would like at the institute", 20 items), Personal-emotional adjustment (e.g. "I have been feeling tense and nervous lately", 15 items) and Attachment ("I expect to stay at this university for my master degree", 15 items). Cronbach's alphas were respectively .83, .84, .84, .85. This questionnaire has been used and validated in various other studies in the U.S. (for overview, see Baker & Siryk, 1999). Furthermore, applications of the SACQ in Belgium and the Netherlands have confirmed that the questionnaire is useful in an European context (Beyers & Goossens, 2002; Niculescu, Nijhuis, & Gijsselaers, 2009).

*Student social Integration Questionnaire.* Students' social integration was measured by the Social Integration Questionnaire (SIQ, Rienties et al., 2010), which consists of 18 items, divided in five constructs. The perception of the faculty scale measures the perception of the faculty of the student's environment (e.g. "I think that my acquaintances/friends have a good perception/image of the faculty", 3 items). The study support scale measures the support of the student's social network, incorporating family and friends (e.g. "My family encourages me to stay in the faculty", 3 items). The student's satisfaction with social life scale consists of six items (e.g. "I am satisfied with my social life outside of class") and the financial support scale consisted of three items (e.g. "Financial aid is important for my continuation at the university"). Finally, the intercultural social life is measured, assessing to which degree students have contact with local students, students of the largest foreign groups (German or Chinese students) and with other international students (e.g. "Outside class I have regular social contacts with Dutch students") (3 items). The intensity of intercultural social life is measured by the mean scores of these three items. The direction of the intercultural social life is measured by two dummy variables (primarily Dutch network, primarily German network). Except for the latter, the other four scales of the social integration questionnaire were validated in two steps. Cronbach's alphas were respectively .77, .87, .79, and .76. Second, in order to test the structure of the four components of the social integration questionnaire that was found in the exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used on another dataset, collected in the other four institutions. The hypothesised model that was found in the exploratory factor analysis had four factors corresponding to four different scales. The items for each scale function as indicators for the respective factor.

*Study-Success.* The study-success of the participating students was assessed by taking into account the number of ECTS credits (a regular business track contains 60 ECTS in one year) obtained after one year of study as well as the student's average grade after one year (GPA). In total 91% of the ID-numbers could be linked with the study-success data of the administrative systems of the five business schools.

*Demographic data:* Gender and Ethnicity. The ethnic identity was measured in line with previous research (Rienties et al., 2010) by four open questions, namely mother's mother tongue, father's mother tongue, own mother tongue

and official citizenship(s). Therefore, in order to prevent a fragmented approach of comparing a limited amount of students within each ethnic category, students were categorized according to the “degree of Westernness”. We assumed that the more Western influences a student had, the easier it would be for the student to adjust to the Dutch culture. Thus, in each of the four categories a distinction was made between Western cultures (European Union, USA, Canada, Australia, New-Zealand) and non-Western cultures. Consequently, four groups (Dutch, Western, mixed-Western, non-Western) were distinguished. Dutch students can thus be compared to students that had a completely Western background (e.g. German student with German parents), a mixed-Western background (e.g. a German student with Turkish parents who was born and raised in Germany), or a purely non-Western background (e.g. Chinese students with Chinese parents).

### Method of data analysis

Firstly, descriptives of the different variables in the study were calculated. Secondly, correlation analysis explored the relation between the SACQ components, the SIQ components and the students’ grades and ECTS. Thirdly, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) explored differences between the different ethnicities. Fourthly, regression-analyses were conducted to identify whether the students’ demographic information, the SACQ and the SIQ components predict students’ grades and ECTS.

Preliminary analyses of the data involved inspection of normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions. Normal plots, box-plots and the calculation of skewness and kurtosis were used to check the normality of distribution. In order to test the equality of group variances the Levene’s statistics were calculated. To distinguish between “practically” significant results and results being “statistically” significant, the effect sizes are reported and the results of the statistical analyses were named significantly by a p value of <.05.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary results**

Table 1 Measures: Questionnaires, Item examples, Cronbach's alphas and descriptive statistics

<i>Scale</i>	<i>N items</i>	<i>Example item</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1999)					
Academic adjustment	24	I know why I am at this institute and what I want out of it	143.98	20.75	.83
Social adjustment	20	I am meeting as many people and making as many friends as I would like at the institute	124.49	19.69	.84
Personal-emotional adjustment	15	have been feeling tense and nervous lately	91.19	18.35	.84
Attachment	15	I expect to stay at this university for my master degree	104.53	15.84	.85
Student Social Integration Questionnaire (Rienties et al., 2010)					
Perception faculty	3	I think that my acquaintances/friends have a good perception/image of the faculty	11.39	2.13	.76
Study support	3	My family encourages me to stay in the faculty	12.07	2.39	.87
Student's satisfaction with social life	6	I am satisfied with my social life outside of class	33.73	6.73	.79
Financial support	3	Financial aid is important for my continuation at the university	7.89	3.50	.76
Intercultural social life (intensity)	3	Outside class I have regular social contacts with Dutch students	3.19	.76	
ECTS			53.81	10.77	
GPA			6.84	.92	

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the four academic integration components, the five social integration components and study performance (GPA and ECTS). Table 2 shows the results for the correlation analysis and indicates that the four subscales of the SACQ have high significantly positive correlations (Baker &

Siryk, 1999; Beyers & Goossens, 2002). Next, the social integration components are significantly positive correlated, except for the financial support scale that shows a significantly negative correlation with perception of the faculty scale. Furthermore, there is a significantly positive correlation between the SACQ scales and the social integration scales, again except for financial support. Study support and the intercultural social life (intensity) also do not correlate significantly with the personal-emotional adjustment scale. Finally, the average grade after one year (GPA) is significantly positively correlated with academic adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, attachment and the perception of the faculty, while the average number of credits obtained after one year (ECTS) only correlates with academic adjustment and attachment. The students' GPA and ECTS do not correlate significantly with the social integration scales.

**Table 2 Correlation analysis of the different variables involved in the study**

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Academic adjustment	1										
2. Social adjustment	.51**	1									
3. Personal-emotional adjustment	.51**	.43**	1								
4. Attachment	.63**	.83**	.45**	1							
5. Perception faculty	.21**	.23**	.09**	.29**	1						
6. Study support	.15**	.18**	.06	.22**	.29**	1					
7. Intercultural social life	.14**	.28**	.03	.22**	.18**	.07*	1				
8. Students' satisfaction with social life	.39**	.86**	.31**	.68**	.23**	.16**	.28**	1			
9. Financial support	.05	.03	-.05	.03	-	.02	-.04	.03	1		
10. GPA	.21**	.04	.05	.10**	.06	-.03	.03	-.01	-.05	1	
11. ECTS	.22**	.07	.08*	.15**	.09*	-.02	.02	.03	-.04	.28**	1

\* $p < .05$  . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### ANOVA

In order to gain a more detailed perspective of the different (sub)groups of international students, Table 3 illustrate the academic and social integration of Dutch, Western, mixed Western and non-Western students. In comparison to Dutch students, Western students score higher on all scales of academic integration with the exception of personal/emotional adjustment. In addition, mixed-Western student score significantly higher on all dimensions of academic integration in comparison to both Dutch and Western students. However, non-Western students score significantly lower on all elements of academic integration with the exception of academic adjustment. Mixed-Western students score highest on support by family and friends and social life. Finally, if we look at study-success, Western students attain higher GPA and numbers of ECTS than Mixed-Western, Dutch and non-Western students. Non-Western students score significantly lower on both GPA and ECTS than Western students, while this difference disappears when we compare non-Western with Dutch or mixed-Western students.

**Table 3 Comparison of academic and social integration**

	Dutch		Western		mixed Western		non-Western		F-value
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Academic adjustment	141.57	20.03	144.15	20.13	150.07	22.96	144.04	22.81	3.503**
Social adjustment	123.46	17.19	126.08	20.08	130.52	16.92	113.25	22.88	13.539**
Personal/Emotional adjustment	94.95	17.57	89.78	18.49	92.14	18.09	84.89	17.57	8.155**
Attachment	103.85	14.50	106.34	15.45	107.10	15.95	94.52	17.80	14.826**
Perception of institute	10.96	2.04	11.80	2.14	10.99	2.07	10.91	1.97	12.892**
Study Support	12.24	2.19	12.04	2.41	12.31	2.69	11.55	2.47	2.234†
Student's satisfaction with social life	33.43	6.06	33.93	6.85	36.59	5.72	30.74	7.71	10.201**
Financial support	8.60	3.38	7.24	3.42	9.35	3.76	7.51	3.01	15.324**
GPA	6.63	0.97	7.01	0.94	6.82	0.71	6.66	0.64	10.905**
ECTS	52.59	11.18	55.65	9.12	51.62	12.35	49.69	13.89	10.598**

ANOVA F-Test for Dutch students (n=288), Western students (n=479), mixed-Western students (n=85) and non-Western students (n=90).

\*\*Coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

† Coefficient is significant at the 0.10 level (2-tailed).

In order to track the possible influence of gender, another ANOVA was executed with all other variables (the SACQ components, the SIQ components and students' GPA and ECTS) as dependent variables. It was found that male students on average score higher on the scale personal-emotional adjustment in contrast to female students ( $p < .001$ ), while female students collect more ECTS during one academic year than male students ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, we controlled for gender and ethnicity in the regression analysis.

## Discussion

In this article, we investigated how academic and social integration is related to study-performance for international students and local students at five business schools in the Netherlands. A common assumption among educators is that academic and social integration of international students, that is the extent to which students adapt to the academic and social way of life, is not well-aligned with the requirements of higher education. In order to gain a perspective on this (perceived) lack of adjustment, this study tried to identify the underlying reasons for students' successful or unsuccessful integration and academic performance, as suggested by Christie et al. (2004). As a new feature of this study, student retention was explained by both academic integration (Baker & Siryk, 1999; Beyers & Goossens, 2002; Tinto, 1975, 1998) and social integration (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Tinto, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2005). Finally, by extending the focus to five business schools across the Netherlands, we were able to compare academic and social integration among 958 students, which strengthens our findings in comparison to a single-institute analysis or a comparison among various disciplines of study.

Our first main finding is that study-success is primarily related to academic integration. Correlation analyses indicate that the average grade after one year is significantly positively correlated with three of the four academic integration scales of Baker and Siryk (1999), namely academic adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and attachment. For the social integration measures, only the perception of the faculty by people in the social network of the student is positively correlated with ECTS.

Our second important finding is that contrary to popular beliefs the academic and social integration of international students was not lower than local students per se. International students did score lower on personal and emotional adjustment than local students, but this can be explained by the fact that adapting to a new culture takes time and might cause stress (Asmar, 2005; Skyrme, 2007). Given that the questionnaire was distributed after six to seven months after the start of the students' academic study, one might expect that international students were not yet fully personally and emotionally adjusted. With time, one might expect that the emotional and personal adjustment problems of international students will disappear.

A third major finding is that the successfulness of academic and social integration is partly related to the “degree of Westernness” of international students. In general, Western students and Mixed Western students performed equal or even better than Dutch students on academic integration and study-performance. This is an positive and optimistic finding for all educators who are concerned with the impact of increased internationalisation (Van der Wende, 2003) and for those who conduct research among ethnic minorities and find that mixed Western students are more likely to drop-out of higher education (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008).

Students from local (Dutch) and non-Western backgrounds obtained lower GPA and ECTS in comparison to Western students. The fact that Dutch students underperform relative to Western students has been found before (Rienties et al., 2010; Tempelaar, Rienties, & Gijsselaers, 2006; Tempelaar et al., 2007). Western students who study in the Netherlands are in general one or two years older than Dutch students and make a conscious decision to study abroad. As a result, Western students’ motivation and learning attitude are significantly more adjusted to the demand of higher education than those of Dutch students (Tempelaar et al., 2006, 2007). In contrast, the lower study-performance of non-Western students in our sample has also been found before (Morrison et al., 2005).

### **Limitations and future research**

A first limitation of this research is that we used self-reported scores of students on academic and social integration. Besides the known issues with using self-reported scores, groups or persons who are “at risk” might not have returned the questionnaire or would have filled in the questionnaire in a socially desirable manner. By distributing the internationally validated questionnaires in class on paper, we tried to limit this selection bias. In addition, we indicated that each student would be given feedback on their academic and social integration scores, hoping to encourage students to report true scores. A second limitation of this research is that the questionnaire was distributed after six to seven months, which might (possibly) prevent us to incorporate (international) students who had already dropped out. Nonetheless, previous research (Baker & Siryk, 1999; Beyers & Goossens, 2002; Gloria et al., 2005; Niculescu et al., 2009; Severiens & Wolff, 2008) has consistently found that low scores on academic and/or social integration leads to poor academic performance of students. In addition, the primary focus in this article was to assess how international students perceive the academic and social worlds in which they study, in line with recommendations of Christie et al. (2004). Finally, although correlation analyses indicate a relation between academic and social integration and study-success, subsequent regression analyses need to be taken into consideration in order to determine the causality of relations.

Given the above limitations, we aim to do a second measurement of the questionnaire among new first-year students in March/April 2010 and extend the total sample of our database. In particular, by extending the database for non-Western students we will be able to compare students from different non-Western cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, in-depth focus group discussions will be held in order to obtain a more profound understanding of the underlying dynamics of academic and social integration in the near future. Finally, in the Acculturation project nine online acculturation courses among nine higher educational institutes in the Netherlands were implemented in spring-autumn 2009 to a large number of international students in a range of disciplines. By offering these courses, we focussed on getting international students acquainted with the Netherlands and the specific issues at the institute. In this way, we hope to facilitate in particular non-Western students who have according to our findings the largest adjustment problems in our business schools.

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