

Beyond Recruitment: An African-Centered Analysis of International Student Support in Zambian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education has increasingly positioned international students as central to institutional growth and global engagement. In many African contexts, however, internationalization strategies have focused primarily on student recruitment, with comparatively limited attention to the quality, cultural responsiveness, and sustainability of institutional support structures. This study offers an African-centered analysis of international student support in selected Zambian universities, moving beyond descriptive accounts of adaptation challenges to examine how institutional practices, cultural contexts, and communal values shape international students' socio-cultural and academic integration.

Guided by socio-cultural adaptation theory and informed by African relational philosophies, particularly Ubuntu, the study adopts a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were drawn from a survey of 227 international students across four Zambian universities, while qualitative insights were generated through focus group discussions exploring students' lived experiences of support, belonging, and institutional engagement. The findings indicate that while basic support services—such as orientation programs, language assistance, accommodation support, and academic guidance are generally available, they are predominantly reactive, unevenly coordinated, and insufficiently embedded within institutional cultures. International students' adaptation is therefore shaped not only by individual coping strategies but also by the extent to which universities foster relational inclusion, communal responsibility, and culturally grounded support.

The study demonstrates that dominant Western-derived models of international student support inadequately capture the communal and relational dimensions of adaptation in African higher education contexts. By foregrounding Ubuntu as an interpretive lens, the article advances a context-sensitive, African-centered interpretive perspective for rethinking international student support beyond recruitment-driven approaches. The findings have implications for institutional practice and national policy, highlighting the need for coordinated, culturally responsive, and student-centered support systems to strengthen the sustainable internationalization of higher education in Zambia.

Keywords: International students; institutional support; socio-cultural adaptation; Ubuntu; higher education; Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining feature of contemporary universities, reshaping academic spaces through increased cross-border mobility, transnational partnerships, and culturally diverse student populations (de Wit, 2020; Leask, 2015). International students now play a central role in institutional visibility, financial sustainability, and global engagement, particularly in regions seeking to strengthen their participation in the global knowledge economy. As a result, internationalization has often been operationalized through recruitment strategies, enrollment targets, and marketing initiatives aimed at attracting students across borders.

While recruitment remains an important dimension of internationalization, growing evidence suggests that enrollment alone does not guarantee meaningful academic success or socio-cultural integration for international students. Research across diverse contexts demonstrates that international students encounter complex adjustment demands, including unfamiliar pedagogical practices, language barriers, social marginalization, and emotional stress associated with cultural transition (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). These challenges underscore the importance of institutional support services not merely as administrative functions but as central mechanisms shaping students' sense of belonging, engagement, and persistence.

In African higher education systems, internationalization has gained renewed momentum through regional integration, faith-based educational networks, and private sector expansion. Zambia, in particular, has emerged as a regional destination for international students due to its political stability, the use of English as the language of instruction, and a growing university sector (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). However, internationalization in this context has largely emphasized access and enrollment growth, with comparatively limited scholarly and policy attention given to the cultural, relational, and institutional dimensions of student support.

Existing research on international student adaptation is heavily dominated by studies conducted in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia. These studies have produced influential socio-cultural adaptation frameworks that conceptualize adjustment primarily as an individual process of learning new skills and coping with stress in host environments (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). While valuable, such models are grounded in Western individualistic assumptions and resource-rich institutional settings, often overlooking communal cultural norms, relational identities, and structural constraints characteristic of many African higher education contexts. In response to these limitations, recent scholarship increasingly calls for greater contextual sensitivity in international student research, particularly through frameworks informed by Global South experiences and knowledge traditions (Teferra, 2019; de Wit, 2020).

Recent empirical studies in Zambia have begun to document the adaptation challenges faced by international students and the limitations of existing support services, demonstrating that these challenges are systemic rather than institution-specific. However, there remains a need to move beyond mapping challenges toward a deeper analysis of how institutional cultures, communal values, and support practices interact to shape international students' lived experiences. In particular, limited attention has been given to African-centered perspectives that conceptualize belonging, support, and adaptation as relational and collective processes.

This study responds to this gap by offering an African-centered analysis of international student support in selected Zambian universities. Drawing on socio-cultural adaptation theory and informed by the African philosophy of Ubuntu-which emphasizes relational identity, mutual care, and shared responsibility (Mbiti, 1969; Letseka, 2012)-the study reconceptualizes international student adaptation as a shared institutional and communal endeavor rather than solely an individual responsibility.

Statement of the Problem

Zambian universities have increasingly positioned themselves as regional destinations for international students, supported by national policies promoting higher education internationalization. While enrollment growth reflects institutional success in attracting international students, less attention has been given to the adequacy, coordination, and cultural grounding of the support systems intended to sustain students' academic and socio-cultural integration. As a result, internationalization efforts in Zambia remain disproportionately focused on recruitment, with limited emphasis on the quality and effectiveness of post-arrival institutional support.

International students in Zambian universities continue to encounter persistent challenges, including language-related academic difficulties, unfamiliar teaching and assessment practices, limited interaction with host students, and emotional stress linked to cultural displacement. When these challenges are not addressed through proactive, coordinated, and culturally responsive support mechanisms, they risk undermining students'

academic performance, sense of belonging, and overall educational experience. Over time, such conditions may contribute to disengagement, dissatisfaction, and increased attrition among international students.

A further dimension of the problem lies in the dominance of Western and Asian contexts within international student adaptation literature. Prevailing models and institutional practices are largely derived from Global North settings and are often transferred to African higher education systems without sufficient contextual adaptation. Consequently, policy development and institutional decision-making in Zambia are frequently informed by frameworks that inadequately account for communal cultural values, relational identities, and structural constraints characteristic of African universities.

The limited availability of empirically grounded, African-centered research on international student support constrains universities' capacity to design support systems that move beyond administrative compliance toward relational inclusion and meaningful integration. This study responds to this problem by critically examining international students' adaptation experiences and evaluating institutional support services in selected Zambian universities through a culturally grounded, African-centered analytical lens.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold:

1. To examine the socio-cultural and academic challenges international students experience while adapting to learning and social environments in selected Zambian universities.
2. To assess the nature, adequacy, and coordination of institutional support services provided to international students beyond recruitment-focused practices.
3. To evaluate the extent to which existing support services facilitate meaningful socio-cultural and academic adaptation within an African higher education context.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant at academic, institutional, and policy levels.

Academically, the study makes an important contribution to international student research by providing context-specific empirical evidence from Zambia, a higher education setting that remains underrepresented in global scholarship. While international student adaptation has been widely studied in Western and Asian contexts, African universities are often marginalized in empirical research. By focusing on selected Zambian universities, this study addresses a critical geographical and contextual gap and broadens understanding of internationalization processes within African higher education systems.

Theoretically, the study extends socio-cultural adaptation and acculturation frameworks by situating them within a Southern African context. The findings demonstrate that commonly identified adaptation challenges—such as language barriers, academic adjustment difficulties, limited social integration, and emotional stress—are also present in African universities. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of institutional culture, relational values, and communal responsibility, thereby reinforcing the need to complement dominant Western-derived models with African-centered perspectives.

At the institutional level, the study offers practical, evidence-based insights into the strengths and limitations of existing international student support services. The findings reveal that while foundational services such as orientation, language support, and academic guidance are generally available, they are often reactive, fragmented, and inconsistently implemented. These insights can inform institutional planning, staff development, and the design of more coordinated, proactive, and student-centered support frameworks aligned with international students' lived realities.

From a policy perspective, the study holds direct relevance for the Ministry of Higher Education and other regulatory bodies. By demonstrating that adaptation challenges are systemic rather than institution-specific, the

study underscores the need for sector-wide policy frameworks, minimum standards, and targeted investment in international student support services. The evidence generated can support more informed policy interventions aimed at strengthening Zambia's position as a sustainable and inclusive regional hub for higher education.

Finally, the study is significant for international students themselves, as it centers their voices and experiences within institutional and policy discussions. Through the integration of quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group discussions, the research foregrounds students' perspectives on adaptation and support, ensuring that future interventions are grounded in student realities rather than administrative assumptions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Operationalizing Ubuntu for International Student Support

To move Ubuntu from a rhetorical framing to an analyzable empirical framework, this study translates core Ubuntu values into four operational dimensions used across instrument design, qualitative coding, and interpretation: **Relational Identity (Mentorship & Belonging)**, **Mutual Care (Well-being & Counseling)**, **Communal Accountability (Institutional Responsibility & Coordination)**, and **Shared Participation (Intercultural Engagement & Co-creation)**. This operationalization follows recent scholarship that articulates Ubuntu as both a pedagogical orientation and a normative institutional capability (Mathebula, 2023; Mthimkhulu, 2024; Borti, 2024).

Rationale and recent supporting evidence

- i. Ubuntu as an analytic and pedagogical paradigm: Contemporary work argues that Ubuntu offers a decolonial, relational paradigm that can be used as a research lens and pedagogical practice in higher education (Waghid, 2020; Borti, 2024). Scholars have employed Ubuntu to reframe curricula, student orientation, and teacher education to emphasize communal responsibility, dignity, and inclusion (Mthimkhulu, 2024; Mpofu, 2024).
- ii. Ubuntu and student capability/well-being: Mathebula (2023) frames Ubuntu as a valued capability for students — a prerequisite condition for flourishing that enables other academic freedoms. Empirical studies in South African higher education show Ubuntu-inflected classroom practices increase perception of belonging and promote inclusive participation (Mathebula, 2023; Boboyi, 2024).
- iii. Ubuntu in academic literacy and pedagogy: Recent empirical projects demonstrate Ubuntu-informed academic literacy and “ubuntugogy” approaches (teaching/learning methods based on Ubuntu) improve student engagement, collaborative learning, and inclusive assessment practices (Mthimkhulu, 2024; research on Ubuntu in academic literacy classes, 2023).
- iv. Ubuntu as institutional practice: Social work and teacher education research articulate how Ubuntu principles translate into institutional practices (peer mentoring, communal accountability structures) and community engagement that strengthen relational care and responsibility (Udah et al., 2025; Boboyi, 2024).

Together these studies show Ubuntu is not only a philosophical concept but also a practicable framework for designing programs and measuring outcomes — precisely what this study implements for international student support.

How Ubuntu was operationalized in this study

The operationalization proceeded through three steps: (1) conceptual mapping, (2) instrument mapping (survey & FGD prompts), and (3) analytic indicators.

1. Conceptual mapping (core values → operational dimensions)

Ubuntu value	Operational dimension	Short definition
Relational identity (“I am because we are”)	Mentorship & peer belonging	Sense of connectedness, mentorship relationships, belonging to campus micro-communities.
Mutual care	Well-being & counselling support	Access to culturally responsive counselling and peer care; formal/informal emotional support.
Communal accountability	Institutional responsibility & coordination	Clear institutional ownership, cross-unit coordination (registrar, student affairs, language center) and accountability for international student outcomes.
Shared participation	Intercultural engagement & co-creation	Sustained, reciprocal participation in co-curricular projects, collaborative learning, and joint community engagement initiatives.

(See Mathebula, 2023; Mthimkhulu, 2024; Borti, 2024; Boboyi, 2024 for conceptual grounding.)

2. Instrument mapping (examples of items & FGD prompts)

Survey items and FGD prompts were designed to measure these dimensions directly. Examples (actual instrument items are in the Appendix):

i. Mentorship & Belonging (Relational Identity)

- Survey Likert item: “I have a faculty or peer mentor who helps me navigate academic expectations.” (1–5)
- FGD prompt: “Tell us about a time a teacher or peer helped you feel part of the campus community.”

ii. Well-being & Counselling (Mutual Care)

- Survey item: “I can access counselling services that understand my cultural background when I need them.”
- FGD prompt: “How did the university respond when you or fellow students faced emotional stress or homesickness?”

iii. Institutional Responsibility (Communal Accountability)

- Survey item: “The university has clear, coordinated services for international students (e.g., single point of contact, cross-unit referrals).”
- FGD prompt: “Describe how different offices helped you during your first semester — were responses coordinated?”

iv. Shared Participation (Intercultural Engagement)

- Survey item: “I regularly participate in collaborative academic or community projects with Zambian students.”
- FGD prompt: “What intercultural activities have enabled sustained relationships rather than one-off events?”

Each survey item was linked to EFA factors (see Methodology). For qualitative coding, the codebook contained primary codes mapped to the same four dimensions, enabling convergent analysis.

3. Analytic indicators and mixed-methods triangulation

For each dimension, we used both quantitative and qualitative indicators:

- i. **Quantitative indicators:** mean scores on survey items, participation rates (self-reported), item correlations with overall satisfaction and retention intention. (EFA factor loadings confirmed the items clustered around the Ubuntu dimensions; items with loadings $< .40$ were removed.)
- ii. **Qualitative indicators:** thematic prevalence in FGDs, depth of relational narratives, examples of institutional coordination vs fragmentation, and explicit student language invoking Ubuntu terms (e.g., “belonging,” “we help each other,” “we are family”).

This triangulation allowed statements such as “relational mentorship predicts higher satisfaction” to be supported both by higher mean survey scores (and correlations) and rich FGD accounts describing mentoring as enabling academic navigation and emotional support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-Cultural Adaptation of International Students

Socio-cultural adaptation is commonly understood as the process through which individuals develop the social skills, cultural understanding, and behavioral competencies required to function effectively within a new cultural environment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Unlike psychological adaptation, which emphasizes emotional well-being and stress management, socio-cultural adaptation focuses on functional competence-how individuals learn to navigate everyday academic, social, and institutional practices in unfamiliar contexts (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). For international students, this process is neither linear nor uniform; rather, it unfolds progressively through sustained interaction with host institutions, peers, and broader community environments.

Contemporary scholarship consistently identifies socio-cultural adaptation as a critical determinant of international students' academic success, persistence, and overall educational satisfaction. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that students who develop higher levels of socio-cultural competence tend to engage more actively in classroom discussions, communicate more confidently with academic staff, and sustain stronger academic trajectories over time (Rienties et al., 2018; Szabó, Ward, & Jose, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In contrast, insufficient socio-cultural adaptation has been linked to academic disengagement, social isolation, acculturative stress, and increased risk of attrition (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Lashari et al., 2023). These findings underscore that adaptation is not merely an individual adjustment challenge but a relational and institutional process shaped by broader learning environments.

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework remains a foundational model for interpreting international students' adaptation experiences, particularly through its identification of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization strategies. Empirical studies continue to confirm that integration-where students retain elements of their cultural identity while actively engaging with the host culture is associated with more favorable academic and psychological outcomes (Szabó et al., 2020; Li, Wang, & Xiao, 2022). However, recent scholarship increasingly problematizes the implicit assumption that integrative adaptation is solely a matter of individual choice or effort. Instead, research emphasizes that the viability of integration is strongly mediated by institutional context, including campus climate, inclusivity practices, and the availability of structured opportunities for meaningful engagement (Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2019).

Language proficiency occupies a central position within socio-cultural adaptation literature. Beyond basic communicative ability, proficiency in the language of instruction shapes students' academic writing, comprehension of assessment expectations, classroom participation, and confidence in interacting with peers and lecturers (Sawir et al., 2008; Rajendram, 2022). Recent studies highlight that limited language proficiency not only constrains academic performance but also contributes to reduced willingness to communicate, social withdrawal, and heightened anxiety-factors that significantly mediate adaptation outcomes (Zhang & Goodson,

2019; Lashari et al., 2023). Consequently, contemporary research increasingly advocates for sustained, discipline-specific language support embedded within academic programs rather than isolated or remedial interventions (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Rajendram, 2022).

Institutional Support Services and Adaptation

Institutional support services play a decisive role in shaping international students' socio-cultural adaptation by mediating structural barriers and fostering inclusive academic and social environments. Such services typically include orientation programs, academic advising, counseling and mental health support, accommodation assistance, immigration guidance, mentorship initiatives, and intercultural engagement activities (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Pawar, 2024). Recent literature conceptualizes these services not merely as administrative provisions but as strategic mechanisms that influence students' sense of belonging, institutional attachment, and long-term academic engagement (Glass et al., 2019).

Orientation programs are widely recognized as critical entry points for international students; however, contemporary research cautions that short-term, information-heavy orientations are insufficient for supporting sustained adaptation. Studies conducted in the post-2020 period increasingly advocate for longitudinal transition models that extend institutional support beyond arrival and respond to challenges as they emerge throughout the academic cycle (Veerasamy et al., 2022; Pawar, 2024). Without such continuity, international students may remain formally inducted yet socially and academically marginalized.

Evidence further indicates that proactive, coordinated, and culturally responsive support services significantly enhance international students' academic engagement, social integration, and retention (Arthur, 2017; Leask, 2015; Glass et al., 2019). Mentorship and peer-support programs, in particular, have gained prominence in recent literature, with studies demonstrating their effectiveness in strengthening social connectedness, academic confidence, and institutional loyalty (Collings et al., 2014; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). These findings reinforce the importance of relational and preventative approaches to student support rather than reactive, problem-driven interventions.

Despite this growing evidence base, research consistently shows that in many developing higher education contexts, institutional support services remain fragmented, under-resourced, and unevenly implemented. Arthur (2017) argues that internationalization strategies frequently prioritize recruitment targets over sustained student support, resulting in institutional responses that address difficulties only after they have escalated. African-focused studies reinforce this concern, highlighting how limited staffing, constrained funding, and lack of specialized training undermine the effectiveness of international student services across the sector (Teferra, 2019; Masaiti, 2020). These structural constraints call into question the transferability of Global North support models to African higher education systems without contextual adaptation.

International Students in Zambia and African Higher Education Contexts

Zambia has a long-standing history of hosting international students, particularly from neighboring African countries, and has increasingly positioned itself as a regional hub for higher education. National policies aimed at expanding access, strengthening regional collaboration, and promoting internationalization have contributed to steady growth in international student enrollment (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019; Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2023). The use of English as the language of instruction, coupled with Zambia's cultural diversity and relative political stability, further enhances its attractiveness as a study destination.

However, recent policy reviews suggest that while national frameworks emphasize enrollment growth and institutional partnerships, comparatively limited attention is devoted to structured support for international students' socio-cultural integration (Masaiti, 2020; HEA, 2023). Empirical evidence from comparable African contexts indicates that international students frequently experience challenges related to language use, unfamiliar teaching and assessment practices, limited interaction with host students, and insufficient counseling and psychosocial support (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Teferra, 2019).

The scarcity of Zambia-specific, empirically grounded research constrains universities' capacity to design evidence-based and culturally responsive support systems. Moreover, dominant adaptation frameworks often overlook African communal values, relational identities, and faith-based institutional cultures that shape student experiences in Southern African universities. As a result, international student support in Zambia risks reproducing externally derived models that prioritize administrative compliance over relational inclusion.

By examining international students' lived experiences and institutional support mechanisms within selected Zambian universities, the present study addresses this empirical and conceptual gap. Grounded in an African-centered perspective, it contributes contextually relevant insights that can inform institutional practice, policy development, and more inclusive approaches to internationalization within Zambia and comparable higher education contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a **convergent parallel mixed-methods research design**, which involves the concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data, independent analysis of each dataset, and systematic integration during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The convergent design was selected because international student adaptation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon influenced by individual experiences, relational dynamics, and institutional environments. Understanding such complexity requires both generalizable statistical patterns and in-depth contextual insights.

Quantitative survey data enabled the identification of broad trends regarding socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges as well as perceptions of institutional support services. Qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs), in contrast, generated rich narrative accounts of international students' lived experiences, relational inclusion, coping strategies, and perceptions of institutional engagement. The integration of both datasets enhanced methodological triangulation and strengthened interpretive validity.

Integration occurred at two analytical levels. First, qualitative findings were used to contextualize and explain statistical patterns identified in survey results. Second, both quantitative and qualitative findings were interpreted through socio-cultural adaptation theory and the African relational philosophy of Ubuntu. This dual theoretical framing strengthened contextual sensitivity while enabling empirical examination of relational and communal dimensions of student adaptation within African higher education settings.

Research Setting

The study was conducted across four purposively selected Zambian universities:

- i. Rusangu University (n = 50)
- ii. University of Lusaka (UNILUS) (n = 50)
- iii. Cavendish University Zambia (n = 52)
- iv. Eden University (n = 75)

These institutions were selected to represent diversity in institutional governance structures, academic orientation, faith-based identity, and international student composition within Zambia's higher education sector. Collectively, the universities include both faith-based and secular private institutions located in urban and peri-urban environments. Each institution offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs across multiple disciplines and maintains established international student populations.

Importantly, all four universities operate within Zambia's national higher education regulatory and policy framework. This shared policy environment enabled meaningful cross-institutional comparison while controlling for systemic influences such as national accreditation standards, language of instruction policies,

and higher education internationalization strategies. The inclusion of multiple institutional contexts enhanced analytical robustness and strengthened the contextual generalizability of findings within Zambia.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved **227 international students** enrolled in full-time academic programs across the four selected universities. Participants were recruited using purposive and voluntary participation sampling strategies to ensure that respondents had direct and sustained experience navigating academic and socio-cultural environments within Zambian universities.

Eligibility Criteria

Participants were required to:

- Be non-Zambian nationals
- Be enrolled in full-time academic programs
- Have completed at least one academic semester

These criteria ensured that respondents possessed sufficient institutional exposure to meaningfully evaluate adaptation experiences and support services.

Participant Demographic Profile

Participants represented diverse national, cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds, reflecting the broader demographic composition of international students in Zambia.

Gender Distribution

- i. Male: 76 (33.5%)
- ii. Female: 151 (66.5%)

Age Distribution

- i. Under 25 years: 83.3%
- ii. 25–34 years: 14.5%
- iii. 35 years and above: 2.2%

Educational Level

- i. Secondary qualification entry: 81.5%
- ii. Bachelor's degree holders: 2.2%
- iii. Master's degree holders: 15%
- iv. Doctoral level: 1.3%

Country of Origin

Participants represented 15 African countries, with the largest student groups originating from Zimbabwe (44%), Angola (11%), and Botswana (9%). Additional representation included students from Namibia,

Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Congo, and Liberia. This diversity strengthened the cross-cultural relevance of the study.

Focus Group Sampling and Participant Overlap

To complement survey data, sixteen focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising six to eight participants, resulting in approximately 110 qualitative participants. Focus group participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling strategies to ensure diversity across gender, academic level, nationality, and length of residence in Zambia.

Approximately 62% of focus group participants had also completed the survey, enabling methodological triangulation and continuity between statistical findings and experiential narratives while maintaining sample diversity.

Instrument Development and Validation

The quantitative questionnaire was developed through a multi-stage validation process to ensure conceptual clarity, cultural relevance, and measurement reliability.

Survey items were adapted from established socio-cultural adaptation and international student belonging instruments, particularly those developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999) and Glass et al. (2019).

Content Validity

Content validity was established through expert review by three scholars specializing in international education and African higher education research. The reviewers evaluated conceptual alignment, item clarity, and cultural appropriateness. Their recommendations informed instrument refinement prior to pilot testing.

Pilot Testing

A pilot study was conducted with 25 international students who were not included in the final sample. Feedback from pilot participants resulted in refinement of question wording, response scale clarity, and contextual relevance.

Construct Validity

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to assess construct validity. The analysis identified three core measurement domains:

- i. Adaptation Challenges
- ii. Institutional Support Services
- iii. Student Satisfaction

Items with factor loadings below .40 were removed or revised. The final instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .776, indicating satisfactory reliability for social science research.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed to 227 international students across the four universities. The questionnaire assessed:

- i. Socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges
- ii. Availability and perceived effectiveness of institutional support services

iii. Overall satisfaction with university experience

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and adaptation patterns. One-way Analysis of Variance (**ANOVA**) was conducted to examine institutional differences in adaptation challenges and support service perceptions. Effect sizes were calculated using eta squared (η^2) to determine the magnitude of institutional variation.

Qualitative Data Collection: Focus Group Discussions

Qualitative data were collected through sixteen semi-structured focus group discussions guided by a standardized discussion protocol. FGDs explored participants' experiences of socio-cultural adjustment, academic adaptation, coping strategies, and perceptions of institutional support.

Each discussion lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The focus group format encouraged interactive dialogue, allowing participants to construct shared meanings and reveal relational dimensions of adaptation.

Discussions continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicating that no new substantive themes were emerging.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage procedure:

- i. Data familiarization through repeated transcript review
- ii. Initial open coding using inductive and deductive approaches
- iii. Development of a preliminary codebook
- iv. Independent coding by two trained researchers
- v. Inter-coder reliability assessment using Cohen's Kappa
- vi. Theme verification through cross-case comparison

Twenty percent of transcripts were double-coded to enhance analytical reliability. Coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion and codebook refinement.

Operationalizing Ubuntu as an Analytical Framework

To strengthen theoretical integration, Ubuntu was operationalized into measurable relational support constructs guiding both survey design and qualitative interpretation.

Ubuntu was translated into four analytical dimensions:

- Relational identity expressed through mentorship and peer belonging
- Mutual care reflected in counseling and emotional support
- Communal accountability manifested through institutional responsibility
- Shared participation demonstrated through intercultural engagement programs

Operationalizing Ubuntu allowed the study to empirically examine how communal values shape international student adaptation in African higher education contexts.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that international students in the selected Zambian universities experience moderate yet persistent socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges. These challenges cut across multiple domains, including language use, academic conventions, social integration, and emotional well-being.

Importantly, these adaptation difficulties do not occur independently. Instead, linguistic, academic, social, and psychological challenges intersect and mutually reinforce one another, shaping students' overall adjustment experiences. For example, limited academic language proficiency often contributes to reduced classroom participation, which in turn restricts social interaction and increases feelings of isolation.

Inferential statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in adaptation challenges across the four universities, suggesting that international student challenges are systemic rather than institution-specific. These findings indicate that broader structural and contextual factors, including institutional support coordination, resource allocation, and internationalization strategies, influence adaptation experiences across the Zambian higher education sector.

Empirical patterns observed

- i. **Relational identity (mentorship & belonging):** Higher mentorship scores correlated with greater perceived academic confidence and campus belonging (survey mean difference and corroborating FGD narratives). Students who reported active mentorship were more likely to report interactions with host students beyond co-national networks (FGD evidence).
- ii. **Mutual care (well-being):** Survey respondents who agreed that counselling was accessible reported lower self-reported acculturative stress. However, only ~40% agreed counselling was culturally responsive; FGDs highlighted stigma, limited cultural competence, and understaffing in counseling units.
- iii. **Communal accountability (institutional coordination):** Low scores and frequent qualitative reports of fragmentation indicated institutional responsibility was weakest of the four dimensions -reflected in FGDs where students described bouncing between offices with little follow-up.
- iv. **Shared participation (intercultural engagement):** Programs existed, but many were episodic; sustained co-created curricular or community projects were rare. Where such projects occurred, students described deeper relational bonds and improved academic collaboration.

These empirical patterns are consistent with recent empirical work advocating Ubuntu-informed pedagogy and institutional practices (Mthimkhulu, 2024; Mathebula, 2023; Boboyi, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Socio-Cultural and Academic Adaptation Challenges

The convergent mixed-methods analysis revealed that international students enrolled in the four selected Zambian universities experience moderate but persistent socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges. The integration of survey findings with focus group narratives demonstrates that these challenges are multidimensional and interconnected, spanning linguistic competence, academic acculturation, social integration, and emotional well-being. These findings reinforce socio-cultural adaptation theory, which conceptualizes adjustment as a dynamic and relational process shaped by both individual agency and institutional environments.

Language-Related Adaptation Challenges

Language-related difficulties emerged as one of the most prominent and consistently reported adaptation concerns. Quantitative survey results indicated that while a majority of respondents (60.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that language support services were available and helpful, a substantial minority (27.3%) expressed dissatisfaction. Additionally, a notable proportion of respondents selected neutral responses, suggesting uncertainty regarding the accessibility or relevance of available language support mechanisms.

The presence of both positive and critical responses highlights a significant divergence between institutional provision and student experience. While language support services exist across institutions, qualitative findings revealed that students frequently perceived these services as insufficiently tailored to disciplinary requirements, inconsistently implemented, or poorly communicated.

Focus group participants emphasized that language challenges extended beyond conversational English to include academic discourse competencies such as scholarly writing, comprehension of assessment expectations, and confidence in classroom participation. Many students described experiencing hesitation when contributing to class discussions due to fear of linguistic inadequacy, which subsequently limited academic engagement and social interaction. These findings suggest that language proficiency operates as a foundational mediator linking academic performance, classroom participation, and socio-cultural integration.

From an Ubuntu-informed analytical perspective, language difficulties also constrained relational inclusion. Students reported that limited language confidence reduced their willingness to form relationships with local peers, thereby weakening communal belonging and mutual support networks.

Academic Adaptation and Pedagogical Adjustment

Students also reported substantial challenges adapting to unfamiliar teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Survey data revealed consistent concerns regarding expectations of independent learning, participatory classroom dynamics, and diverse assessment formats such as research-based assignments and continuous evaluation systems.

Focus group discussions further illuminated how prior educational socialisation shaped these experiences. Many participants described transitioning from highly structured and teacher-centered learning environments to more autonomous and discussion-oriented academic systems. This transition often generated academic uncertainty, particularly during the early stages of enrollment.

Importantly, qualitative narratives revealed that academic adaptation challenges frequently intersected with language barriers. Students reported difficulties interpreting assignment instructions, understanding grading rubrics, and engaging in collaborative academic activities. These findings highlight the cumulative nature of adaptation challenges and reinforce the importance of integrated academic and linguistic support systems.

Socio-Cultural Integration and Campus Engagement

Intercultural Engagement and Belonging

Survey findings indicated generally positive perceptions of cultural exchange and intercultural engagement initiatives, with 57.3% of respondents agreeing that such programs supported adaptation. However, 29.5% of respondents selected neutral responses, suggesting limited participation or superficial engagement.

Qualitative data provided deeper insight into this pattern. Students acknowledged the existence of intercultural events and orientation activities, but frequently described them as episodic rather than sustained. Participants reported that while initial orientation programs facilitated basic institutional familiarization, they rarely fostered long-term social integration or meaningful intercultural dialogue.

From an Ubuntu analytical perspective, these findings suggest that existing intercultural programs often prioritize symbolic diversity rather than relational inclusion. Students expressed a desire for structured

opportunities to develop deeper interpersonal connections, collaborative learning experiences, and sustained peer mentorship.

Social Interaction and Peer Networks

Limited interaction between international and host students emerged as a recurring theme across both datasets. Many international students reported reliance on co-national or international peer networks for social and emotional support. While these networks provided immediate comfort and cultural familiarity, they often limited broader socio-cultural integration within campus communities.

Focus group participants highlighted structural barriers contributing to social segmentation, including limited collaborative learning opportunities, cultural misunderstandings, and absence of structured institutional mechanisms promoting interaction between local and international students.

Within the Ubuntu framework, social integration is understood as a communal process involving reciprocal belonging and shared responsibility. The findings indicate that without deliberate institutional facilitation, opportunities for communal participation remain unevenly distributed across student populations.

Institutional Comparisons and Systemic Patterns

Inferential statistical analysis using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed no statistically significant differences in socio-cultural or academic adaptation experiences across the four universities ($p > .05$). Effect size analysis further confirmed that institutional variation contributed minimally to differences in student adaptation outcomes.

This finding suggests that adaptation challenges experienced by international students are systemic rather than institution-specific. Despite differences in institutional identity, governance structures, and academic orientation, students across universities reported similar patterns of linguistic difficulty, academic adjustment challenges, and social integration barriers.

The absence of institutional variation indicates that broader structural factors within Zambia's higher education sector influence international student experiences. These factors include limited coordination of support services, constrained institutional resources, and internationalization strategies that prioritize enrollment expansion without equivalent investment in student support infrastructure.

Summary of Results

Overall, the integrated findings demonstrate that while Zambian universities provide foundational international student support services; including orientation programs, language assistance, and academic advising, these services only partially mitigate socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges.

International students continue to navigate persistent adaptation difficulties that extend beyond initial institutional entry. The findings highlight the limitations of support models that prioritize recruitment and administrative compliance without sustained relational and academic integration mechanisms.

This discussion interprets the findings in relation to the study's three research objectives and integrates empirical evidence with socio-cultural adaptation theory and the Ubuntu relational framework.

Research Objective 1: Understanding Adaptation Challenges

The findings confirm that international students in Zambian universities experience multidimensional adaptation challenges spanning linguistic, academic, social, and emotional domains. These challenges align with existing socio-cultural adaptation literature emphasizing the interconnected nature of academic engagement, social belonging, and psychological well-being.

Language proficiency emerged as a central determinant of adaptation outcomes. Consistent with prior research, linguistic competence influenced students' academic participation, confidence, and social interaction. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that language challenges extend beyond communication to encompass academic acculturation processes.

Academic adaptation challenges further highlight the influence of prior educational socialization. Differences in pedagogical expectations created transitional stress and academic uncertainty, particularly during early enrollment stages.

Social integration challenges underscore the relational dimension of adaptation. The findings demonstrate that culturally diverse campus environments do not automatically generate social inclusion. Instead, meaningful integration requires intentional institutional structures facilitating intercultural engagement and relational belonging.

Research Objective 2: Evaluating Institutional Support Services

The findings indicate that while foundational support services exist across institutions, their accessibility, coordination, and contextual relevance vary considerably. Language support services, although widely available, often function as generic or supplementary interventions rather than integrated academic development programs.

Similarly, intercultural engagement initiatives frequently operate as short-term events rather than sustained relational integration mechanisms. These findings highlight a disconnect between institutional service provision and student experiential adequacy.

Qualitative evidence further revealed that institutional support services are largely reactive. Students frequently reported receiving assistance only after encountering significant academic or socio-cultural challenges. This reactive orientation limits early intervention and reduces institutional capacity to support sustained adaptation.

Research Objective 3: Effectiveness of Support Services

The absence of significant institutional variation reinforces the conclusion that limitations in support effectiveness are systemic rather than institution-specific. While existing services alleviate certain adaptation challenges, they do not consistently produce long-term integration outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that effective international student support requires integrated, longitudinal, and relational frameworks. Students consistently expressed the need for mentorship, culturally responsive counseling, and sustained social engagement mechanisms.

Within the Ubuntu framework, effective support services must promote relational belonging, communal responsibility, and shared participation. The findings suggest that current institutional models partially reflect these principles but remain insufficiently operationalized within formal support structures.

Practical Implications for Policy and Programming

Operationalizing Ubuntu provides specific levers for institutional reform:

- i. **Mentorship programs** structured with training in culturally responsive supervision and pairing international students with faculty/senior peers. (Supported by Mathebula, 2023; Mpofu, 2024.)
- ii. **Culturally competent counseling**-invest in training counselors and creating group peer counseling forums to lower stigma and increase access (Boboyi, 2024).
- iii. **Cross-unit coordination mechanisms**-designate an international student coordinator with authority across registrar, student services, and academic units (Udah et al., 2025).

iv. **Co-created intercultural projects**-embed collaborative assignments and community engagement projects that require sustained partnership between local and international students, reflecting the Ubuntu value of shared participation (Mthimkhulu, 2024).

Operationalized Ubuntu therefore moves institutional practice from isolated services toward relationally embedded, accountable systems with measurable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined socio-cultural and academic adaptation experiences among international students in selected Zambian universities and evaluated the adequacy and effectiveness of institutional support services.

The findings demonstrate that international students experience moderate but persistent adaptation challenges shaped by linguistic barriers, unfamiliar pedagogical systems, limited social interaction, and emotional stress associated with cultural transition. Although universities provide essential support services, these frameworks remain inconsistently implemented, unevenly accessed, and predominantly reactive.

A significant contribution of this study is the identification of systemic adaptation challenges across institutions. The absence of institutional variation suggests that broader structural and policy factors influence international student experiences within Zambia's higher education sector.

Overall, the study concludes that advancing international student adaptation requires a strategic shift toward coordinated, culturally responsive, and relational support frameworks grounded in African communal values and Ubuntu-informed institutional practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Discipline-Specific Language and Academic Support

Universities should embed academic language development within curricula through faculty-based writing support, discipline-specific workshops, and integrated academic literacy programs.

2. Transition from Reactive to Proactive Support Models

Institutions should implement longitudinal orientation programs, regular adaptation monitoring systems, and early intervention frameworks to support sustained student adjustment.

3. Establish Structured Mentorship and Peer Support Programs

Mentorship initiatives pairing international students with trained faculty mentors and peer leaders can enhance academic guidance, social integration, and institutional belonging.

4. Expand Culturally Responsive Counseling Services

Universities should invest in specialized counseling programs addressing acculturative stress, cultural transition challenges, and international student mental health needs.

5. Promote Sustained Intercultural Engagement

Institutions should design collaborative learning projects, intercultural dialogue forums, and community engagement programs that foster meaningful interaction between international and local students.

6. Align National Internationalization Policy with Institutional Capacity

National regulatory bodies should establish minimum support standards, targeted funding mechanisms, and accountability frameworks to strengthen international student support systems across the sector.

Final Remark

By strengthening institutional coordination, relational inclusion, and culturally responsive support systems, Zambian universities can move beyond recruitment-driven internationalization toward sustainable, inclusive, and academically enriching international student experiences.

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