Building intercultural communication skills to support international students' adjustment process to university: An action research

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Abstract

This study aims to develop international students' intercultural communication skills through action research as they adjust to university life. Action Research Interactional Ritual Cycle: The Compass Model is introduced in the current study. Ten international undergraduate students from different countries studying at a foundation university in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye voluntarily participated in this study. The research data was collected through face-to-face interviews, activity-centered focus group meetings and practices, reflective diaries and observation forms. The interactional data was analyzed and evaluated through the interactional ritual perspective, and discourse analysis was used for the analysis of student reflective diaries to determine how they reflected on the interaction. A series of practices was carried out as activities, experience sharing and workshops by academics who are experts in their fields. The main theme that emerged from the interactional rituals was "in-group interactional rituals in intercultural communication", and sub themes were "in-group belonging" and "in-group interaction". The concept maps for the themes and sub-themes were created with MAXQDA. Analysis of the findings identified two sub-themes: "In-group belonging" with further sub-themes "experience sharing" and "feeling valuable"; and "in-group interaction" with further sub-themes "getting to know cultures" and "getting to know each other". Fine transcription of the interactional data was carried out and interactional rituals were revealed through discourse analysis. By implementing the action plan in relation to social interaction problems determined at the beginning of the action research, students' intercultural communication skills improved, and this contributed to the university adjustment process. This study provides rich insights for higher education leaders to enact culturally responsive inclusive approaches in their practices. The research is also expected to inform interdisciplinary action research studies in higher education leadership.

Keywords: Adjustment to University; Communication Studies; Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Intercultural Interaction; Interaction Studies; International Students

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1 INTRODUCTION

Increasing international student mobility has raised the importance of economic, social and intercultural communication issues, and universities hoping to attract international students need to develop internationalization strategies. Severiens and Wolff (2008) argue that international students who feel at home in the country in which they are studying, have ties with faculty staff and friends, and participate in social activities are more academically and socially successful. Various European Union reports have scrutinized the issue of internationalization, and a road map has been drawn up for how this process should be managed by institutions (Reichert & Tauch, 2005). In Türkiye, the focal point of the internationalization process is the issue of student exchange and interculturalization, which places importance on intercultural communication. International students are offered the opportunity to be involved in the education and training process in their new environment, while learning about and developing their skills within the richness of the new culture.

The internationalization philosophy and implementation steps in higher education institutions can significantly shape a student's journey. In their study on teaching staff involved in the internationalization process, Gümüşeli, Hacıfazlıoğlu, and Dalgıç (2010) reveal basic deficiencies in the internationalization process even in universities providing education and training in English. They emphasize that the internationalization process should not only be given importance by academic administrators and relevant units, but should also be internalized by all units, ranging from teaching to administrative staff. A comparison between internationalization process experiences in the early years of the Bologna process and current practices shows that significant progress has been made. But there are still important steps to be taken in managing the process in a way that will make a difference in student life and have a positive influence on them.

As reflected in the literature and reports of higher education institutions and organizations, studies on experiences of internationalization are limited and very few address the adjustment process of international students to university life from the perspective of intercultural communication. In addition, there are no action research-oriented studies that support the adjustment process of international students in the first years of their transition to university life. These limitations suggest that this study, which is based on supporting the adjustment to higher education culture and intercultural communication skills of international students in the first two years of their education at a higher education institution, will contribute to the fields of higher education management and leadership as well as communication research.

The following section reviews the literature on the meaning of culture and intercultural communication in the global era, interactional rituals, acculturation, and reviews studies on the adjustment of international students to university life. The methodology is then presented with the findings of the current research in relation to the theoretical framework.

1.1   Reconceptualization of Culture and Intercultural Communication in the Global Era

In our globalized world, it may not be easy or sufficient to limit culture within a framework. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) reveal that there are nearly 300 definitions of culture, with footnotes. In a world of increasing technology and strengthened cross-border communication, the concept of culture has expanded and has moved to a different dimension.

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) argue that culture separates people according to their characteristics, provides information about them and shows how they are similar and different from other people. They state, in fact, that culture is not just one thing or the other, but an invention, a discovery. If culture is considered an action, it has a significant impact on understanding intercultural communication; it is necessary to focus on what people actually do and understand what tools or communication systems they use, not on the cultural characteristics they identify with (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012). Hua (2014) considers culture as a discourse system. Similarly,

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Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) approach intercultural communication from a discourse analytic perspective, emphasizing that the discourse system is a set of cultural tools and considering how we use these tools to communicate and form identities.

Intercultural communication, like culture, is a complex yet rich concept that is difficult to explain with a single definition. While communication breakdowns are not always a problem, they often appear as elements that crown the richness of intercultural communication. What is important is that individuals use cultural tools and try to carve this richness with the local culture and other cultures they live in and communicate and interact with them.

Interaction in intercultural communication takes place not only through speech but also through non-verbal communication. Glances, posture, social distancing, tone of voice, cadences, and even silences can be meaningful variables in the context in which they occur. Thinking of culture as an action or as a discourse system within a process of interaction will shed light on the communication and relations to be established in the process of interaction in the global world in which we live. The following section analyzes the intercultural communication process that emerges in interaction from the perspective of interactional rituals, acculturation and a sense of belonging.

1.2   Interactional Rituals, Acculturation and a Sense of Belonging

Rituals are the basis of many of the actions we perform in daily life and reflect the culture and/or society to which we belong. As Hofstede (1994) puts it, rituals are part of cultural indicators. Muir (2005) has shown how rituals can be perceived differently in different cultures and Schegloff (1995) has shown that rituals occur in everyday conversations and often during interaction. Kádár (2013) has taken a broadly relational view of rituals. Disregarding a priori assumptions, he argues that rituals are constructed in interaction. In order to reveal the reality of relational rituals, rather than considering rituals as a single phenomenon in the traditional sense, it would be helpful to consider them as taking place in every interaction. In Durkheim's view, rituals are a very important phenomenon in intra- and inter-group relations in terms of establishing or reinforcing the relationship (Durkheim, 1912).

A different approach is taken to interaction theory in Goffman's (1967) book *Rituals of Interaction: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. The basis of Goffman's interactional ritual theory is an adaptation of Mead's symbolic interactionism and social behaviorism approaches adopted in daily life. Goffman examined interactions between individuals in detail and explains social organization within an interactional framework. Influenced by Goffman and Durkheim, Collins proposes a chain of interaction rituals theory. This theory is also referred to as a chain of micro-encounters, where individuals are acquaintances and friends in informal groups, where there is no authority or ownership (Collins, 1981). Collins (1981) argues that when rituals are successful, there is a sense of group membership and emotional energy, whereas in cases of ritual failure, this emotional energy does not occur (Collins, 2004).

Rituals provide social cohesion and integrity and contribute to both the individual and the social group in which they are performed. From this point of view, rituals are a very important phenomenon as group members establish or strengthen their relationships within the group in which they are performed, both within and between groups. Kádár (2017) argues that "many interactions are ritual by nature" and that "ritual is an interactionally salient act which transforms and/or reinforces interpersonal relationships" (p.1).

Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change arising from the interaction of individuals with different cultures (Bilgin, 2003). It involves the interaction of two or more cultures and the resulting psychological change process (Berry, 1999). Berry (1999) puts forward four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. Assimilation is an individual's rejection of their own culture and the search for cultural identity in the dominant culture (Berry, 1992). Separation occurs when the non-dominant culture strictly adheres to its own culture and does not accept the new culture. Integration occurs when individuals interact with the dominant group and at the same time maintain their own culture. Marginalization occurs when an individual

fails to interact either with their own culture or the dominant culture. It is clear that a sense of belonging to the host country in intercultural communication will positively affect an individual's adjustment process, which may include the different stages of acculturation proposed by Berry (1999).

Banting and Soroka (2012) explain socio-cultural integration as a sense of belonging and attachment to one's own culture and to the host culture. That sense of belonging is accepted by the group of which one is a member and has cognitive, emotional and behavioral ties (Taşkesen 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2004). In an interactional context, a sense of belonging plays a mediating role in the relationships established through rituals. "Sense of belonging and identity perception are reciprocal interactive events that are both socially regulated and individually negotiated" (Caxaj & Berman, 2010, p. 5).

International student mobility is evident across the world (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010) and the literature on international students' adjustment is broad in different disciplinary studies both nationally and internationally. However, the number of communication studies examining international students in the context of intercultural communication are limited and there is no action research in communication studies.

Gomez, Urzua, and Glass (2014) examined international students' adjustment to university life, participation in leisure activities on and off campus, leisure constraints, language and social relations. They took the Students' Adjustment to College Life Questionnaire (SACQ) (Baker & Siryk, 1999) as a reference and considered four stages: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment, and institutional commitment. They show that acculturation is effective in participation in on-campus sports activities and off-campus socialization, and that both are effective factors in the university adjustment process. They also observed that international students who were successful in the acculturation process did not experience limitations in leisure time activities. Quester and Chong (2001) argue that having strong ties with their country of origin is inversely related to acculturation, showing that those who maintained strong ties visited home more often. Clearly, the more individuals reinforce their home culture, the stronger the acculturation separation strategy will be. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) show that international students who have more friends from their host country are happier, feel less homesick, and have stronger social ties.

Lu, Guénier and Hird (2025), in an empirical study, demonstrated the crucial role of intercultural contact on intercultural communication competence of Chinese students studying in the UK through facilitation of indirect contact such as media engagement and direct interaction with English speakers. D'Orazzi and Marangell (2025) argue for improving intercultural communicative competence in order to enhance the relationship between students. In the same study the findings demonstrated that though the students were comfortable with communicating with their peers, there were barriers such as shortage of opportunities for establishing relationships both inside and outside classes.

In another study, Navarro, Tolosa and Egerton (2025) examined the development of intercultural competence (IC) skills by learning language and culture within the framework of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in Aotearoa New Zealand in which they demonstrated openness, curiosity and respect as a means to IC. Intercultural competence has also been analysed in a case study conducted in Australia through the experiences of an Indonesian doctoral student. It demonstrated the importance of being actively engaged in intercultural interactions and improving understanding of diverse cultures as a means to intercultural competence in a multicultural setting (Hastowohadi, Ma'rifatulloh & Widiantari, 2025).

Al-Habies et al. (2025) examined the influence of an educational program conducted with first grade international students who were from different countries studying in Jordan. The study was intended to monitor their psychological, cultural and social alienation through pre and post-tests in quasi-experimental research design. The results of the study demonstrate the effect of the comprehensible training program which included courses such as Jordanian culture and tradition and students' rights and responsibilities. It was found that it

decreased social and cultural alienation while highlighting an increase in psychological alienation, which needs to be addressed.

A participatory action research study that employed international students as participants, program developers, beneficiaries and project coordinators demonstrates the importance of such research in developing cultural and situational programs for student integration and inclusion (Johnson, Adkins-Seifen, Sandhu, Arbles, & Makino, 2018). The current study, conducted in a foundation university in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye, shares student experiences through action research in which they took an active part as participants, problem solvers and program developers. The following section discusses the methodology and the research process.
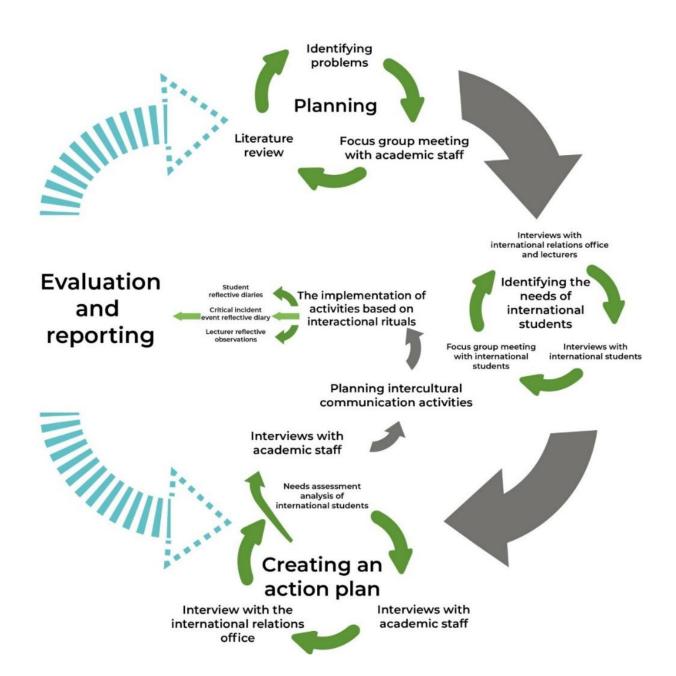
2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study was based on action research and designed with reference to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009) and Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008) and includes four basic stages: needs analysis, creation and implementation of the action plan, evaluation of the action, and sharing.

Action research is a process based on continuous development that identifies problematic areas in individuals' lives through sharing and reflection so that steps for improvement can be taken. Rather than direct intervention, action research is more of an awareness process that can be used to reflect on the problems international students experience as they adjust to a new culture and to find solutions with the intermediaries to put into practice in the process (Mertler, 2017). Intermediaries in this study are the sharing, activity-based focus group meetings, seminars and workshops conducted during the implementation of the action plan. A unique model, Action Research Interactional Ritual Cycle: The Compass Model (Kalkavan, 2022) was used. This model, shown in Figure 1, involves four main stages of the action research. These stages are demonstrated in the form of cycles, which also incorporates different cycles in the form of meetings, focus group meetings, activities, practices and applications. This unique model was put forward from the perspective of interactional ritual typology for international students' adjustment to university life and the development of their intercultural communication skills.

Figure 1
Action Research Interactional Ritual Cycle: The Compass Model (Kalkavan, 2022)

A Cycle of Interactional Rituals Based on Action Research: The Compass Model

2.2 Data Collection Tools

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, activity-centered focus group meetings and practices, reflective diaries and observation forms.

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2.3   Participants

The current study was conducted through purposeful sampling with international undergraduate students studying at a foundation university located in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye. Using the convenience sampling method, the university where the researcher works was selected. To ensure representation from different countries, maximum variation sampling was employed including participants from Algeria (Nadia, Marwa, Omar), Syria (Tuana, Roy, Alley, Dorian), Jordan (Aliana), France (Sezer) and Gambia (Mustafa). Pseudonyms were used for all participant names. Six sophomore students and two freshman students (Alley and Dorian) from the English Language Teaching Department actively participated in the study. Two other participants, a freshman law student (Sezer) and a junior student from the International Relations and Political Science Department (Mustafa), took part only in a few activities at the beginning of the study.

2.4   Researcher Positionality

The first author is the primary researcher who is actively engaged in all the phases of the project as well as taking the lead in the design and implementation of the action research. Researcher's positionality as a lecturer and a PhD candidate at the time of implementation gave her the opportunity to serve as an active researcher while maintaining observations and interactions with the faculty, who are actively involved in the various activities incorporated into the study. The researcher also took all the necessary precautions to respond to the issues of bias and validity in the research processes.

The role of the researcher in the study was not only to collect and analyze data, but also to act as a mentor to advise and guide the participants. The researcher was able to examine and take a picture of the integration process and, through reflective journals and planned practices and activities, the researcher ultimately aimed to contribute to the students' adjustment to campus life and local culture, their participation in activities, and the students' intercultural interaction process.

In order to ensure credibility and consistency in the research, confirmation meetings were held with the international students who actively participated in the research, as well as with the faculty members and administrators who interacted with the students. In addition, each process of the action research was regularly evaluated in weekly meetings with expert academics and the peer reviewer. The researcher had the opportunity to make continuous evaluations on the functioning of the implementation process, on any new needs that emerged, and the arrangements that could be made in the plan by keeping a regular diary. The dashed lines in figure 1 represent the continuous revisions in the action plan.

2.5   Data Analysis and Interpretation

All interviews were recorded by audio or video, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. The analysis followed steps suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999): "organizing the data, defining themes and categories, testing the hypothesis with the data, finding alternative explanations for the data, and organizing the data". The interactional data from the focus groups and the relationship established within the group was analyzed through interactional ritual (Kádár, 2017) and discourse analysis. Reflective diaries were collected regularly and analyzed through discourse analysis. Analyses were conducted in the original language. The themes and sub-themes were concept mapped using MAXQDA. In addition, observation reports and individual interviews were analyzed and evaluated. A concept map of the codes from the facilitators' observation reports was created with MAXQDA.

2.6   Enacting Action Research

This study applies action research steps as an approach to cultivate international undergraduate students' intercultural communication skills during their adjustment to their university lives. The planning phase, as shown in the model, involves identifying the problem, focus group meetings with the academics, and the literature review. What is unique in this approach is that the researcher kept continuous interaction with the university

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leaders in order to uniquely tailor the action steps to meet the needs of the international students. The following section explains the four stages in the research design process.

Step I. Needs Assessment: In-depth data identifying international student needs and the problems experienced in the first two years was collected through focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews. Interviews, with the international relations office, academics and international students, and focus group meetings were conducted. The questions that formed the basis of the discussions and interviews were devised following discussions with academic management administrators at the university where the researcher works.

Step II. Creating the Action Plan: Using the data obtained from the needs assessment and the opinions and suggestions of academic staff and administrators working with international students, a program was developed to support and strengthen international students' intercultural communication skills. The individual differences of each student were identified and considered during implementation. Action research was based on flexibility accommodating changes in line with the changing needs and expectations of the students and the circumstances. Therefore, the researcher prioritized reflection throughout the process to maintain inclusion among the students.

Step III. Implementation of the Action Plan: Expert facilitators from the Faculty of Communication and the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling of the Faculty of Education conducted sharing, activity-based focus group meetings, seminars and workshops to consider how international students could overcome the difficulties they faced. The programs and activities prepared by the researcher were mostly conducted face-to-face, although three students participated online in one application and one student participated online in the final workshop. All processes were coordinated and guided by the researcher and each activity was recorded. A session on reflective practices and experience sharing, given by the researcher and an expert on the subject, highlighted the important role of philosophy and practice in the research. The activities, implemented with the support of field experts, covered topics on university adjustment, intercultural communication, intercultural interaction, experience sharing, conflict management, career planning, workshops, and monitoring. Students were asked to share their reflective diaries at the end of each activity as a requirement of the research. As a collaborative action research, students were asked to contribute to different activities organized within the scope of the project, not only as participants but also as researchers. While these activities enabled students to engage with friends and local culture, they became a part of the solution of the problem/problems by sharing their experiences.

Action Research Activities and Practices

- *Activity 1:* Leadership achievements through a journey of music with a pianist (facilitator): This event was organized by a world-renowned pianist for all university students. The facilitator played different melodies and asked students to notice how music invokes different emotions.

- *Activity 2:* Focus group lunch meeting with the Vice Rector: The focus group session and SWOT analysis was conducted by the Vice Rector in the university cafeteria, where the group had lunch, while discussing the problems international students experience and listening to the group's demands from the university. The session was conducted in English.

- *Activity 3:* Cultural train activity with a psychological counselor (facilitator): The facilitator asked the international students to draw or write the characteristics of their own cultures which the others in the groups would not know. The students worked in groups with their peers from the same culture and they presented their work at the end of the session by making a train laying them on the table with the drawings of all the groups. The session was conducted in English.

- *Activity 4:* Experience sharing with a social anthropologist (facilitator): In the experience sharing activity, the facilitator shared his experiences as an international student in France. The students were able to

empathize with the facilitator and told their own stories. He had invited another international student to the event to share his experiences. The session was conducted in English, Turkish and Arabic.

- *Activity 5:* Intercultural interaction application with a psychological counselor (facilitator): The facilitator started the activity with his own story as an international student in Türkiye. He talked about intercultural interaction and the vital role of rejecting prejudices as a means to intercultural interaction. Then, through analyzing a caricature and in an activity in which students switch places when the facilitator read various sentences, he encouraged the students to see, learn and realize how students from different cultures, ideas and experiences actually have many commonalities. The session was conducted in Turkish with English translation.

- *Activity 6:* Conflict management activity with a psychological counselor (facilitator): The facilitator conducted a debate about opening a hotel in Mombasa. The groups were asked to argue their case and try to get their position accepted. At the end, the facilitator gave insights on the rules of conflict management. The session was conducted in Turkish with English translation.

- *Activity 7:* Discovering my career success application with a psychological counselor (facilitator): The facilitator, also the director of the university's career center, began the activity by introducing himself. He asked the participants to introduce themselves and talk about their basic skills, expectations and plans for the future. The facilitator conducted My Career Success Story form (Ayaz, 2021) that he devised and explained to the participants how to fill in the career milestones (i.e. turning points) on the form. The session was conducted in English and Turkish with English translation.

- *Activity 8:* Music workshop with a pianist (facilitator): The facilitator gave workshop training on the narrative power of music in movies and the differences it creates in our perceptions.

- *Monitoring activity:* First intercultural food presentation event: One month after completing the action research implementation activities and receiving the final evaluations, the first intercultural food presentation event was organized in cooperation with the international relations office and the gastronomy and culinary arts department as a monitoring event. In the first phase of the event, a meeting was held with the students in the gastronomy and culinary arts department to discuss and plan which dish they would like to make representing their own culture; then the gastronomy lecturer explained the hygiene and safety issues involved. Finally, the students displayed the dishes with the plating techniques they learned and practiced during the workshop. The session was in Turkish with English translation. The students were able to use the plating method of their own culture. After the workshop, during the intercultural food exhibition, the Minister of Culture and Tourism, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the Rector and many other important visitors attended the exhibition. The event was covered by local and foreign media and some students gave interviews during the workshop, which was an unforgettable and valuable experience for all students.

Step IV. Evaluation: Interaction was at the center of this study, being a central consideration at every stage of the implementation and activities. In the activity-centered focus group meetings and practices, interaction within the group was observed and analyzed. The resulting interactional data was analyzed and evaluated from the perspective of Kádár's (2017) interactional ritual. In addition, a detailed transcription of the interactional data occurring within the group was carried out according to the transcription rules suggested by Jefferson (2004) and developed by Hepburn and Bolden (2017), and these interactional rituals were revealed through discourse analysis. Sample interactional rituals representing the data are shared in the findings section. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participant students before and after each activity and practice, and the participant students were asked to share their impressions in a reflective diary. Except for one student, the diaries were shared in English. The reflective diaries were also intended to contribute to the development of students' capacity for self-reflection. Through the diaries, student interaction within the group was analyzed from the

student perspective. In the middle of the second week of the second semester, students were asked to share a diary entry of a critical incident they had experienced in the first two weeks of the semester. The analysis report of these diaries was used for interim project evaluation and revision of the action plan.

While analyzing the activity-centered focus group practices, evaluations were carried out through discourse analysis using various data collection methods such as voice recordings, video recordings, and photographs to examine the in-group interaction. As Van Dijk states, discourse does not have to be written or spoken, and Barthes emphasizes that body language and manner of speaking are also narratives (Sözen, 1999). According to Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012), discourse is defined as "the cultural tools we use to communicate with each other and to enact social identities". For this reason, activity-centered focus group practices, reflective diaries, seminars, workshops and all activities and practices organized are intended to be the golden key to understanding the students' intercultural communication and interaction.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Needs Analysis

In the first phase of the action research, the problems, suggestions and happy events from the students' perspective were categorized under different headings from the data collected from Algerian, French, Gambian, Syrian and Jordanian students. Two main themes emerged from the needs analysis: "social interaction" and "language barrier". Social interaction occupies a central place.

The needs analysis involved collecting views and suggestions from the data obtained from international student forms, interviews and messages, the focus group lunch SWOT analysis conducted with the vice rector, and the interviews with the academic staff working in the units related to international students. From this data, a program was developed by the researcher to support international students' adjustment to university life by strengthening their intercultural communication skills. While implementing the proposed plan, the needs and individual differences of each student were evaluated. Due to the nature of action research, the program was planned to be open to continuous revision, and the action steps were enriched with new activities as a result of the needs and situations that emerged during the process.

3.2 Designing an Action Plan

The action plan was put into practice in cooperation with the Faculty of Communication and the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department of the Faculty of Education. The researcher, together with academic experts in their fields, carried out activity-based focus group meetings, experience sharing events, seminars, workshops, different activities and practices designed to improve students' intercultural communication skills to facilitate international students' adjustment to university life. All processes were guided by the researcher. Interviews were held with expert facilitators before and after each activity, and close coordination was ensured by constant communication with the facilitators and participating students for the realization of the activities.

3.3 Implementation of the Action Plan

Interaction within the group was ensured by a series of practices, activities, experience sharing and workshops, through interactional rituals, and it was observed in both student diaries and observation reports that this interaction and the reflection of the acquired skills were effective. The interactional rituals established within the group, in other words, the bond established, emerged under the main theme of "in-group interactional rituals in intercultural communication" comprising two sub-themes: "in-group belonging" and "in-group interaction".

"In-group belonging" was realized in the sub-themes "experience sharing" and "feeling valued", while "in-group interaction" was realized in the sub-themes "recognizing cultures" and "getting to know each other". In addition, a detailed transcription of the interaction within the group was made and these interactional rituals were revealed through discourse analysis (as proposed by Jefferson (2004) and developed by Hepburn and Bolden

(2017)). The final activity and monitoring activity through reflective diaries and evaluations also support the emerging themes. The facilitators' observation reports were analyzed through discourse analysis, and it was observed that the interviews and the resulting data supported the main themes and sub-themes of the study in the sub-dimension.

3.4   In-group belonging

3.4.1   Experience sharing

The in-group interaction codes formed by the first sub-theme of the in-group belonging theme "experience sharing" were observed in the activities of the anthropologist and psychological counselor. In the experience sharing activity, sharing of his experiences as an international student in France, the facilitator enabled the students to empathize with their own situations and tell their own stories by listening to others. In the same event, Behram, another international student, contributed to the translation process in Arabic, the common language of all participants, and after the meeting, he shared his experience of adjustment to university in Türkiye. Upon the recommendation of the facilitator, Behram used the common language of the group so that we, the facilitators, could empathize with how they felt, while the students' sense of belonging within the group was reinforced. This activity enabled the participating students to identify themselves within the shared experience and realize that similar situations can happen anywhere in the world. Marwa suggested that: "It is important to be able to listen to others' experiences in order to understand our own. When we sincerely listen to someone else's story, we gain a new and different understanding of who they are; we understand their perspective, interpretation and understanding of the world and of themselves". As Marwa put it, being able to listen and understand is an important beginning for communication. Similarly, Alley stated that listening to other people's experiences helps us to understand the new culture. She also emphasized the importance of learning the culture and language of a country before going there. Roy wrote in his diary after the activity that it is possible to build relationships and friendships with people from other cultures by talking about differences, and that the solution to problems is to talk and respect each other until there is a consensus of understanding. He emphasized finding solutions rather than ending a relationship and concluded that both parties should belong to that group in order to talk and get along. Dorian stated that international students should also make an effort to think about the differences in habits and cultures, and from Behram's shared experience, he expressed how Behram became immersed in the local culture and how he was even indistinguishable from the local culture. Dorian emphasized that this issue should be considered on a deeper, even global level. In this experience sharing activity, the participant students showed important examples of the bond that develops when they belong to the same culture within the group. It is obvious that bonds established through experience sharing and interactional ritual contribute to their intercultural communication and adjustment process.

In the intercultural interaction practice, the facilitator, psychological counselor, encouraged the students see, learn and realize that students who have different cultures, ideas and experiences, actually have many commonalities. The students who switched places when he read various sentences met on the same line at many points. In particular, when he asked students to switch places depending on whether they ate bread for dinner the day before, had a foreign national friend, had dinner with a foreign national friend, had hosted a foreign national in their home, and thought that foreign nationals posed a threat to work in their country, it was observed that most of the students switched places. Through practical activities, the facilitator explained to the students that we have many similarities and as long as we see the commonalities and can challenge our prejudices. Meeting in similarities, challenging prejudices and understanding the other person, and being a part of that group is an important step to interaction by experiencing a sense of belonging.

In-group interactional rituals emerged in the elective Arabic class when international students helped their friends from the local culture. The international students were instrumental in creating a sense of belonging to the culture they lived in. As stated by the peer reviewer during our interview, helping their friends from the local culture they live in was an important indicator that international students gained a sense of belonging. Marwa

shared her happiness at having the opportunity to help her and her fellow international students' Turkish friends in the Arabic elective course. Similarly, Omar stated that talking about the Spanish TV series they watched with the Spanish student who came to the language course and adopting a neutral, natural attitude in such interactions and trying to make the other person feel part of the group would increase his desire to communicate with other languages and cultures. In addition to his own adjustment efforts, by helping people from different cultures and making them a part of the group, Omar actually moved from participant to researcher status in the action research and accelerated his own intercultural communication and adjustment process at the same time with the sense of belonging to the culture he lived in.

The concept of belonging was also shared in the facilitators' observation reports. The social anthropologist mentioned two dramatic moments in his interviews. The first was that none of his French friends invited him to their home and therefore did not internalize and accept him; the second was that he overcame his loneliness and sense of belonging with foreigners, and the only place he felt a sense of belonging was at Ramadan tables where he sat with different students. He wrote that he could really connect with the group, especially through the concepts of table and acceptance (rites of passage). Experience sharing, belonging and the facilitator giving Behram the opportunity to speak in Arabic, even though he did not understand, enabled the reticent students to participate in the conversation and he observed that the common language made the participant students feel safe. At this point, belonging emerged as trust in the facilitators' observation reports.

3.4.2   Feeling valued

The sub-theme "feeling valued" was reflected in the lunch focus group meeting with the Vice Rector, the action research initial and final music workshops, and the final and monitoring student diaries. It was observed that when student feel valued, their sense of belonging to their university was strengthened. In interviews and their reflective diaries, the students conveyed that they were very happy to meet the Vice Rector, the university administration and the pianist facilitator. The close interaction between them, both through talking and taking photos, was an important step for them feeling a sense of belonging in university life. Upon the request of international students, the pianist facilitator organized a music workshop at the university, which made the students feel valuable and further increased their sense of belonging. Nadia expressed her feelings as "it was really an honor to have her make time for us".

During the lunch organized as a focus group meeting with the Vice Rector, students expressed their difficulties and shared their suggestions. In the post event interviews, international students shared their joy of this lunch event, and many wrote in their diaries that they felt valued. The interaction that took place during and after this event was an important practice that reinforced international students' sense of belonging to the university culture. For example, Marwa wrote in her diary that as international students "we were valued", that she loved this meeting, that everyone was treated equally and that they felt very comfortable, and that they also felt that they had someone to talk to whenever they needed to, which was a great satisfaction. Tuana expressed her happiness that the Vice Rector came and listened to them and stated that she felt like her thoughts and opinion mattered. As reflected in all the student diaries, Dorian wrote that the university took them into consideration at the senior management level and that it was great to have events organized to listen to their ideas and for international students to get to know each other. Alley also expressed her gratitude for being listened to and for the notes taken and the effort made. We conclude that Tuana and other international students contributed to the solution of problems by experiencing a sense of belonging at the university by having their suggestions listened to.

In the follow-up event organized one month after the practices, students plated the dishes of their own cultures with the training they received and exhibited them at the First Intercultural Food Presentation Event at the Faculty of Communication. All students shared in their diaries and in post-event interviews that they felt happy and proud during the visits of the Minister of Culture and Tourism, the University Board of Trustees and the Rector, as due to the event being reported in local and international media, and that it was an unforgettable memory. Nadia said

"that was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced", while Marwa said "organization, the planning, the self-care, everything that was shown to us as international students meant a lot which made our university feel like home".

Tuana, like many of her friends in the same group, said that it was an incredible feeling to meet and talk to the Minister, to have their photo taken, and to be thanked by the Minister, even though they did not expect him to taste the food from their plate first. The interaction of the international students with the Minister, the university administration, faculty and friends at the monitoring event demonstrated their sense of belonging to their university at the last event. The fact that they shared that they felt valued at many events, showed that they had established a strong bond with the university, and that they now even see their university as home. The sub-themes, experience sharing and feeling valued, which emerged under the in-group belonging theme, show the bonds that the students participating in the action research established with the administration, facilitators and friends at their universities. This established bond played a fundamental role in their intercultural communication and adjustment to university life.

3.5   In-Group Interaction

3.5.1   Getting to Know Cultures

The first sub-theme of the in-group interaction theme, "getting to know cultures", was observed through the interactional rituals that the participating students established with their international and Turkish friends in the activities they attended. The representative data section is shared separately with detailed transcription. Within the scope of the codes of "getting to know cultures" sub theme, intercultural interaction was exhibited in the activities Cultural Train, Intercultural Interaction and First Intercultural Food Presentation Event.

In the third activity of the action research, Culture Train, when the facilitator at the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling, asked the students to draw items representing their culture and describe them by arranging them in the form of a train, the students in the group had the opportunity to get to know each other's culture and had a fun time. Aliana said that "we had a fantastic experience" and that she was very happy to learn about different cultures. Omar said that they had a lot of fun and that he would like to repeat it at every opportunity, and Marwa emphasized that it was a very fun event and that the communication environment with international students was her favorite part. Tuana said that she liked the natural environment where they learned different things about each other's cultures and talked and joked with their friends even though it was the first time they had met each other. Dorian also stated that he would like to repeat this fun activity. Good bonds between the participating students were formed while getting to know their cultures.

In the intercultural interaction practice, as shared in the previous theme, participating international students and Turkish students had the opportunity to learn about each other's cultural similarities through experience. In his reflective diary, Dorian wrote that the students realized the importance of understanding the culture in order to adapt as international students. Nadia stated that it was very important for them to understand how the other person thinks in the cartoons they were given in the first part of the activity and asked to talk about. Roy stated that it is important to talk and interact with the other culture in order to adapt and that although he had taken a Turkish course a few months ago, he felt it was a mistake that he had not done so before. Interacting with his Turkish friends in their language was very useful for developing his Turkish.

During the Cultural Train activity, the facilitator observed that the interaction among the students was strong, and the motivation of the students was high as they made their drawings (designs), sometimes laughing and having fun and sometimes seriously discussing them. She also observed that the students were eager to talk about their own countries, that they had fun talking about their own countries through drawings, and that they particularly bonded through laughing at their drawings. She also stated that the students were eager to talk about themselves, and more importantly, to ask questions of others, indicating that they valued the interaction.

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The facilitator in the intercultural interaction activity observed that the international students communicated well with the local students and that the local students helped them communicate. In the final summative evaluations of the action research, the contribution of the project to the development of intercultural communication skills and the process of adjustment to university was shared by all students. Roy wrote that before participating in this project he described himself as shy, but after he could talk and communicate, he could ask questions when he did not understand something or when he needed to. Dorian said that this project strengthened their intercultural communication, Alley thought that knowing cultures comes before learning the language and she was happy to have the opportunity to get to know different cultures with this project. Aliana wrote that she got to know different cultures and that the project activities brought them closer to their friends, increased their self-confidence, improved their language skills, and helped them learn about love, cooperation, help and coexistence. Marwa and Tuana emphasized that they developed non-verbal as well as verbal communication skills during intercultural communication.

In the first intercultural food presentation event, students cooked dishes from their own cultures at home and brought them to the university. After receiving training, it was observed that they interacted closely with their friends from different cultures in the kitchen while preparing for the presentation, and this interaction was further strengthened during the presentation. Marwa wrote that she loved communicating with a student from a different ethnic background as much as her other friends in the project, and Roy wrote that the monitoring activity was very special as this research was unique, and that they had a lot of fun getting to know different cultures and Turkish culture. In addition, Roy, like all the other participants of the project, shared that he would be happy to participate in such activities in the future.

Omar underlined the importance of respecting different cultures and experiencing something from those cultures from different perspectives, and described the interaction that took place in the monitoring activity with the words "digging through interculturalism in the world". Dorian also mentioned that introducing their own culture in this activity was a great opportunity for students to communicate with each other. Alley, like Dorian, saw the monitoring activity as an incredible opportunity to create harmony between different cultures. Aliana wrote that the presentation of each country's food and culture fostered friendship and tolerance and brought the project to a wonderful final. All the practice-oriented activities enabled the international students to get to know each other's culture and the local culture.

3.5.2   Getting to know each other

The second sub-theme of the in-group interaction theme "getting to know each other" was observed in the interactional rituals established among international and Turkish friends during the focus group lunch meeting with the Vice Rector, the culture train activity, the intercultural interaction practice, the conflict management activity and the first intercultural food presentation event. Students had the opportunity to meet and get to know each other more in different activities. The students' active participation, laughing and having fun, in events, practices, seminars and workshop and activities strengthened their intercultural communication and interaction, and it was observed that international students, whose social network and interaction expanded, were at different points in their adjustment to the university. In addition, the facilitator observation reports noted that their self-confidence and confidence interacting within their peer group increased.

The first activity was a focus group lunch with the Vice Rector where international students met each other and talked about their problems and suggested solutions. Marwa explained that they listened to each other's problems from different perspectives. Dorian said they met international students from countries such as Algeria, Jordan, Syria and Gambia. Alley wrote in her diary that she was happy to meet and talk with other friends. The students formed a cultural train and had a great time talking about their cultures and having fun together. This warm interaction was very useful in their bonding and laid the foundations for the interactional bond they established. As Omar said "We had a good laugh" at the puppet (cava culi) that Omar drew. Tuana described the

relaxed atmosphere in which they joked and laughed together despite meeting for the first time. Below is an excerpt from the interactional data when Omar drew a puppet.

1	Omar:	now this thing *şimdi bu şey*
2	Dr.Aydın:	ok we are very [curious about it *merak ediyorum*
3	Araştırmacı: (Researcher)	*[curious about it* *merak ediyoruz*
4	Katılımcılar:	*[hih hih hih hih*
5	Omar:	so this one in Indonesia is called cava culi *şöyle buna endonezya'da cava culi deniyor*
6	Marwa:	Ye:ah *Evet*
7	Omar:	which means is a puppet shadow or a shadow puppet= *gölge gölge tiyatrosu anlamına geliyor*
8	Dr. Aydın:	:= ah ok *ah tamam*
9	Araştırmacı (Researcher):	nice: *çok hoş*
10	Dr. Aydın:	it is like puppet *kukla gibi*
11	Omar:	it is a puppet *bu bir kukla*
12 13		this thing has been (.) in the Indonesian shadow theatres for over 1000 years= *bu şey (.) Endonezya gölge tiyatrolarında 1000 yılı aşkın bir süredir var=*
14	( ):	=yeah= *Evet*

In the intercultural interaction practice, international students came together with Turkish students for the first time and got to know each other, interacting more closely and participating in the activities, having fun throughout the practice. Nadia expressed her happiness at meeting different foreign students in this activity and wrote that she looked forward to repeating it. Marwa wrote that they learned to accept the other's point of view. Alley enjoyed this activity very much and stated that when students feel unwanted in a country, prejudices can be prevented, and individuals can be more productive by focusing on similarities rather than differences.

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In the conflict management activity, students had a lot of fun defending their opinions in groups of four in an interactive setting. Dorian wrote that this activity was a lot of fun as the local and international students were in harmony and he hopes to repeat the experience. Alley wrote that she had a great time with the new students in this interesting activity. Roy wrote that it was a very fun activity and Aliana conveyed that it was the best session she had ever attended. Tuana found she was able to talk to her Turkish friends during the debate, that she could easily share her true opinions and that she was happy that her friends liked her opinions and thanked her with praise. She wrote that her Turkish friends encouraged her, even though she did not expect this to happen. She also said she looked forward to participating in such events in the future. Nadia said that it was a great meeting, they had a lot of fun, and it is very nice for non-social people to discuss with their friends in groups. She said it is always a pleasure for her to meet a new facilitator and friends.

In his final diary entry, Omar shared that he found all the activities with experts important and fun, that he had met new people and established good relationships and that his integration process had definitely improved since the beginning of the semester. Marwa, who experienced culture shock when she first came to the university, wrote that a few activities in this project helped her overcome this problem and she experienced cultural integration. She felt that her social environment improved and that the new environment would help her adapt to the university.

In her monitoring activity diary, Nadia said it was a great feeling to meet and become close friends with a half Syrian and half Algerian person like herself in the first intercultural food presentation event. She also said that she met great people and had a great time at this event. Tuana also met many international and Turkish students and wrote that they were very kind to her and that she became close friends with them. She was especially happy to explain to the Ukrainian girls and her Turkish friends the stuffed zucchini and cabbage she had prepared and the food brought by other Syrian students, and how her friends were very interested in her culture.

The facilitator in the conflict management observation report suggested that although it was unclear what effect the presence of people who did not know each other would have in the first stage, good group dynamics developed as a result of the group distributions. The facilitator shared that the self-confidence and comfort of the students was much better than he expected, and that he thought the action plan practices carried out before his activity had an effect on this situation. He said that all the participants seemed to have developed a significant level of trust in the researcher, as evidenced by their timely participation in the activity, their efforts to take an active role, and their timely and complete compliance with the instructions. In his observation report of the career event, the facilitator observed that the students were warm, friendly, open to communication, interested and cheerful, and that they were able to express themselves comfortably. He wrote that the international students had strong communication, were very close with both the facilitator and their Turkish friends and were able to express themselves while understanding and empathizing with other's ideas.

This study has shown that developing intercultural communication skills and interacting with local and different cultures is very important for international students to integrate into the host culture. Through different practices, activities, workshops and seminars, this action research provided students with the opportunity to learn by doing and experiencing. Interactional rituals in intercultural communication within the group provided the opportunity to adjust to university, engage with friends and facilitators and get to know each other and their cultures through laughter and fun. The participating students learned from the experiences of the facilitators and experts and shared their own experiences. Moreover, their opinions and suggestions were taken in different activities, and they felt of value to the university. By moving from participant status to contributor status from time to time improved the students' sense of belonging to their university and accelerated their adjustment process. The following section discusses the results of the analysis and presents the conclusions and suggestions for future studies.

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4   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1   Group Belonging in the Interaction Axis

Culture, as Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) emphasize, appears as an action in this study. The international students who participated in the action research established and developed in-group bonds in different activities and practices. Similar to Kádár's (2017) observations, the students in the current study established and/or reinforced relationships within the group. This relationship also enabled and benefited their intercultural communication. During relationship construction, their sense of belonging to the group and the university increased. In fact, nurturing their sense of belonging strengthened their communication. Although the phenomenon of belonging is very complex and difficult to define, this study has shown us that cultural identities are actually constructed in interaction. Sözen (1998) states that identities are a phenomenon that change according to context and occurs through relationships and communication. In this study, interactional identities were realized through rituals established within the group.

In-group belonging or, in other words, interactional identities emerged through activities and practices of sharing experiences made students feel valued and important. At some point, this interaction, as suggested by the social identity theory, enabled the participants to identify with the group through the positive relationships formed within the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). After the focus group interview with the Vice Rector, students expressed their satisfaction with the value given to their opinions. In the experience sharing activity, they were able to establish a bond with the facilitator who conducted the activity and by sharing their own experiences, students were able to establish a relationship between the facilitator and the group. This bond, or ritual as Kádár (2017) puts it, is seen from a wide and intertwined range of relationships and carries with it different dynamics such as politeness and moral order.

Banting and Soroka (2012) explain socio-cultural integration as a sense of belonging to one's own culture and to the host culture. The phenomenon of belonging was realized in this study through cultural identities established with the interactional rituals in the group, and, in fact, it was revealed in the final diaries that these interactional rituals were a means of developing students' sense of belonging to the group and to the university. Students also became researchers in this action research. At the beginning of the second semester, they assisted Turkish students in the elective Arabic course, moving from being guests to being hosts, preserving their own culture on the one hand, and on the other, integrating with the guest cultures, which Berry (1999) identifies in his stages of acculturation.

4.2   Interaction on the Axis of Getting to Know Group Members

Intercultural in-group interactional rituals emerged through activities in which group members got to know their cultures and each other, demonstrating a mediator role in the process of adjustment to university life. Getting to know each other is more than meeting and learning about each other; it is also establishing a bond, performing a ritual, and interacting or strengthening the established bond. Kádár (2017) argues that "many interactions are ritual by nature" and that "ritual is an interactionally salient act which transforms and/or reinforces interpersonal relationships" (p.1). In this study, the rituals were realized through activities and practices in which international students got to know each other and students and facilitators from the local culture they were visiting. The action research began with the culture train event and there was warm interaction between students, who laughed and had fun together. Similarly, intercultural interaction activity practices enabled students to learn and experience intercultural interaction by doing. The debate process in the conflict management activity brought Turkish and international students closer together through intense debate. The activity ended with the two debaters hugging each other and declaring themselves good friends. In fact, protecting the reputation of the other party, i.e. Goffman's "face" phenomenon, was effective in the interactional rituals. Students who learned about conflict management and the process of persuasion during the debate had the opportunity to learn intercultural communication by living and doing. The first intercultural food presentation event was the

culmination of all the interactional rituals, and the students' final diaries bear witness to the incredible moments that took place in this event, from the Minister to the student.

Facilitator observations gave the codes of joy, having fun, harmony, participation, asking questions and being helpful under the theme of in-group interaction. These codes, as shared in the previous theme, showed the bond of belonging that was established between the international students and the group and university, and became a step toward adjustment to university life.

Most of the studies focusing on the integration process of international students have tried to evaluate the process within the framework of certain theories and concepts. However, through participatory action research, Johnson, Adkins-Seifen, Sandhu, Arbles, and Makino (2018), included students as participants, program developers, beneficiaries and project coordinators and emphasized the importance of participatory action research in developing cultural and situational programs on adjustment and participation. Mertler (2017) reveals that action research is not a direct intervention method but can be seen as an awareness process that mirrors the problems experienced by international students in the process of adjustment to a new culture and finding solutions through the intermediaries put into practice in the process. The current study conducted in a foundation university in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye, touched the lives of students by creating and implementing an action plan to address the problem of social interaction, which is the basis of many problems, and also helped students improve their intercultural communication skills and contributed to students' integration to the university. This study brought a different perspective to the development of culture, a sense of belonging and intercultural communication skills by including interactional rituals in the process and showed how participants use cultural tools for communication and to construct identities as a cultural discourse system, as suggested by Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012). In the research, eight international students from the English Language Teaching Department actively participated in the study. The participants had the opportunity to develop their ability to respond to the needs of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds by enhancing their intercultural communication skills through the use of discourse analysis as a fundamental tool. These skills were further enriched through activity-centered focus group meetings, thoughtful partnerships, reflective diaries, and the faculty facilitators' observation forms. This process helped the aspiring teachers become more aware of their own narratives during their adjustment to university life.

Future studies may conduct this study on academic administrators and academic leaders working with international students, the experiences of those working in academic administration units in universities can be examined. In this way, qualitative data can be provided for the implementation of internationalization in university administrations. The data revealed in the research shows that the staff working in higher education institutions need to be supported in the context of internationalization. In order to address this need, training programs and education-oriented action research need to be developed both for administrative and academic staff to become the driving force of the internationalization process.

The present study has put forward a unique model, "Action Research Interactional Rituals Cycle: The Compass Model", by including international students in higher education in the research process with a practice-oriented program. It would be useful to use this model in future studies on adaptation to institutions and to improve intercultural communication skills at different education levels and/or in different professional groups.

In this research, strengthening the intercultural communication skills of international students who actively participated in the action research activities, supporting their adjustment to the university, in essence, touching their lives, demonstrated the importance and power of action research. All in all, "intercultural interaction is the key to harmony" and it is hoped that this action research, serves as one of the first in interdisciplinary studies focusing on intercultural communication providing practice oriented perspectives to higher education leaders while informing future interdisciplinary studies on leadership and communication. While this study shows the power of enacting action research as an approach to implement positive change in the lives of undergraduate

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international students, it also gives insights for future studies that can be implemented on multiple stakeholders of higher education.

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