SHOCKED BUT NOT IN DESPAIR: AN EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES AND ADJUSTMENT STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF SANTA MARIA (UFSM), BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of and access to education in Brazil has also been extended to international students. This opportunity has brought about several challenges, leading to discrepancies between these students' expectations and experiences. This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore their challenges and adaptation strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen (13) international students and subjected to coding and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that international students face academic-linguistic, sociocultural, and financial challenges, while strategies such as self-help, interdependence, and institutional support serve as means of adaptation and of achieving their academic goals. The study recommends greater attention to aspects of support for international students' adaptation at the university that have not yet been adequately addressed, as well as a reassessment of the internationalisation policies set out in the 2016–2026 Institutional Development Plan (PDI) of the Federal University of Santa Maria.

KEYWORDS

international students' challenges; transition challenges; transition adjustment; students' coping strategies.

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EM CHOQUE, MAS NÃO DESESPERADOS: UMA EXPLORAÇÃO DOS DESAFIOS E DAS ESTRATÉGIAS DE ADAPTAÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES INTERNACIONAIS NA UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA MARIA (UFSM), BRASIL

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RESUMO

A expansão da educação no Brasil e o alargamento do acesso à mesma têm também abrangido estudantes internacionais. Esta oportunidade tem gerado alguns desafios, levando a contradições entre as expectativas e as experiências destes estudantes. O estudo adotou uma abordagem qualitativa de natureza fenomenológica para explorar os seus desafios e estratégias de adaptação. Os dados foram obtidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com treze (13) estudantes internacionais e submetidos a codificação e análise temática. Os resultados revelam que os estudantes internacionais enfrentam desafios de natureza académico-linguística, sociocultural e financeira, enquanto estratégias como a autoajuda, a interdependência e o apoio institucional constituem meios de adaptação e de alcance dos seus objetivos académicos. Como recomendação, é necessário prestar atenção aos aspetos ainda não contemplados no apoio à adaptação destes estudantes na universidade, bem como reavaliar as políticas de internacionalização previstas no Plano de Desenvolvimento Institucional (PDI) 2016–2026 da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

desafios dos estudantes internacionais; desafios de transição; adaptação à transição; estratégias de enfrentamento dos estudantes.

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CONMOCIONADOS, PERO NO DESESPERADOS: UNA EXPLORACIÓN DE LOS DESAFÍOS Y LAS ESTRATEGIAS DE ADAPTACIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES INTERNACIONALES EN LA UNIVERSIDAD FEDERAL DE SANTA MARIA (UFSM), BRASIL

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RESUMEN

La expansión de la educación en Brasil y la ampliación del acceso a ella también han beneficiado a estudiantes internacionales. Esta oportunidad ha generado algunos desafíos, dando lugar a discrepancias entre las expectativas y las experiencias de estos estudiantes. El estudio adoptó un enfoque cualitativo de carácter fenomenológico para explorar sus desafíos y estrategias de adaptación. Los datos se obtuvieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a trece (13) estudiantes internacionales y se sometieron a codificación y análisis temático. Los resultados revelan que los estudiantes internacionales se enfrentan a desafíos de índole académico-lingüística, sociocultural y financiera, mientras que estrategias como la autoayuda, la interdependencia y el apoyo institucional constituyen medios para adaptarse y alcanzar sus objetivos académicos. Como recomendación, se considera necesario prestar atención a los aspectos aún no contemplados en el apoyo a la adaptación de estos estudiantes en la universidad, así como reevaluar las políticas de internacionalización previstas en el Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (PDI) 2016–2026 de la Universidad Federal de Santa Maria.

PALABRAS-CLAVE

desafíos de los estudiantes internacionales; desafíos de transición; adaptación a la transición; estrategias de afrontamiento de los estudiantes.

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Shocked but Not in Despair: An Exploration of Challenges and Adjustment Strategies of International Students at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Brazil, like many other countries, has become home to international students from different continents, partly as a result of the Government's intention to expand access to education and ensure equity for all. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) corroborated that the expansion of education was an integral part of the country's progress, with higher enrolment rates at every level of education, reduced inequalities in access, and falling rates of illiteracy. Younger generations entering the workforce are also much better educated than previous generations. This highly skilled workforce has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in Brazil's economic development (OECD, 2021). Meanwhile, efforts to expand access and ensure equity in education have also been extended to international students, resulting in an increasing number of students from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. These students seek quality education for academic advancement, as well as the free education and opportunities offered by Brazilian universities. The internationalisation of education in Brazil is in line with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasises access to inclusive, quality, and equitable education and promotes lifelong learning for all (Organização das Nações Unidas Brasil, 2015). This has led to the establishment of several student exchange programmes in Brazil, such as the Undergraduate Student Exchange Programme (PEC-G), Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PEC-PLE), the Graduate Student Exchange Programme (PEC-PG), and the International Cooperation Group of Brazilian Universities (GCUB). These programmes are designed for international students, especially those from Latin American and African countries, to study at undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels, as also emphasised by Neves and Barbosa (2020). They are initiatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education (MEC), the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). Together, these bodies offer international students opportunities to study in undergraduate and postgraduate courses at higher education institutions in Brazil without tuition fees. Over the years, these programmes have attracted international students from different countries and with different sociocultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. For many, studying in Brazil therefore involves learning to navigate a new environment that may present significant challenges.

Against this background, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by international students at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), a Brazilian federal

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public higher education institution located in Santa Maria, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The study may serve as a reference for government bodies, universities, international student support offices and departments, as well as teachers, regarding the challenges students face and the strategies they use to adjust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE CHALLENGING FACTORS

Typically, moving from one country to another can bring significant challenges, both explicit and less apparent, because of the many processes involved in discovering a new life in a new destination. In discussing the cultural-distance hypothesis, Wong and Hyde (2024) also argue that people are more likely to face adjustment difficulties and stress when they find themselves in a culturally different environment than when they remain in a familiar cultural environment. In trying to overcome these barriers through different adjustment strategies, many still face difficulties and stress. These difficulties can be mitigated through timely intervention and help from people around them or from relevant systems; without significant intervention, however, they may persist. They can involve a range of factors, including language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, financial constraints, and religious or political differences (Wong & Hyde, 2024). In the case of students who cross borders for academic purposes, these set of students may encounter a range of challenges arising from intercultural contact which can shape their experience in their host country. Studies have shown that students studying abroad encounter a range of challenges at their universities and in the surrounding communities (Tajvar et al., 2024; William et al., 2024). These challenges also depend on the nature, norms, and conditions of the location. For example, it may be easier for international students to deal with challenges in multicultural, tolerant, and accommodating societies. Nevertheless, studies report that international students may face academic difficulties arising from demanding curricula and workloads (Fabeku, 2024; Pinto, 2021); cultural differences and social isolation during adjustment (Eulatth Vidal & Kamp, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2020); language barriers and financial constraints (Halali et al., 2022; Kumsa et al., 2020; Pinto, 2021); and security, legal, administrative, health, and emotional challenges (Katsumoto et al., 2023). This study focuses on common challenges that international students may face in their host countries, particularly language-related, sociocultural, and academic challenges. It also seeks to investigate the significant implications of these challenges for international students, as they may undermine their aspirations to study abroad and make their experiences unproductive or disappointing.

Language barrier

In academic settings, language proficiency – the ability to read, write, speak, and listen –is important for students' academic advancement, as language serves as a means of communication. However, the many languages and sociolinguistic backgrounds found

in the world are also reflected in academic settings, posing challenges to interaction and communication (Halali et al., 2022). Studies on the challenges faced by international students have clearly identified language barriers as one of the major challenges for students studying abroad (Alasmari, 2023; Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024). Research by Halali et al. (2022) and Park et al. (2017) also reveals that non-English-speaking international students studying at English-speaking universities abroad face challenges and stress because of their limited language proficiency. On the other hand, English-speaking international students studying at non-English-speaking universities also face language barriers (Ibragimova & Tarasova, 2018). Furthermore, Oduwaye et al. (2023), in a trend analysis of international students' challenges over 21 years (2002–2022), found that sociocultural and academic challenges were among the major challenges faced by international students, alongside language-related problems. Language is central to the academic context because it enables the exchange of knowledge and ideas between teachers and students (Andrade, 2006). Limited proficiency in the host country's language can therefore result in difficulties, anxiety, and stress (Andrade, 2006).

Sociocultural challenges

Sociocultural challenges might confront international students studying abroad with cultural differences around the world. For instance, Babushko et al. (2022) conducted a study of 60 international students at undergraduate and master's levels in three universities in Kyiv and found that these students faced cross-cultural problems, especially during their first year in the host country. Xiao et al. (2010), in a study of 639 international students and 387 local students, also found that international students faced sociocultural challenges arising from language differences. These challenges can be associated with cultural differences, climate and weather conditions, food in host communities, clothing and living conditions, religious beliefs, and language differences (Hommadova, 2017; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Wang, 2009). Sociocultural challenges such as social discrimination, racism, cultural prejudice, and difficulties relating to and making friends with local students because of isolation or stereotyping also affect international students (Jin et al., 2022; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). International students travelling abroad may be aware of the sociocultural challenges that await them at their host university or in the community, and may make preparations to mitigate them. However, the challenges encountered in the host country may outweigh their prior knowledge or preparation, causing distress (Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Wong & Hyde, 2024).

Academic challenges

In a study conducted by Ying (2005) on the challenges faced by Taiwanese international students studying in the United States over a period of two years, academic challenges were found to be among the greatest difficulties. These difficulties do not usually result from low cognitive performance or mental capacity, but rather from differences between teaching and learning styles in the host country and those in students' home countries (Wong & Hyde, 2024), university curricula and workloads, or lecturers'

accents (Oduwaye et al., 2023). They may also arise from extensive reading, writing term papers, excessive homework after long class hours, examination stress, and other demands (Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024). Academic challenges may have a greater effect on international students than on local students because international students often feel isolated and lonely when they are unable to interact with local students (Rivas et al., 2019; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). Language barriers may also make it difficult for them to communicate their feelings or explain their difficulties to lecturers and friends (Jin et al., 2022). These difficulties may eventually lead to depression or, in more serious cases, withdrawal from university (Maleku et al., 2022).

Financial challenges

Several studies have shown that international students face financial constraints while studying in their host countries (Kumsa et al., 2020; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Tajvar et al., 2024). One major financial constraint is the high tuition fees that international students may have to pay to study abroad (Shah et al., 2019). Students need strong financial support to meet these costs if they do not have a scholarship or adequate support from their families. This situation can cause serious financial hardship, particularly for students from low-income families or countries with less valuable currencies. Although a limited number of countries such as Brazil, Finland, Germany, and Norway offer tuition-free education to local and international students (Duryea et al., 2023; Lungu, 2022), the latter may still face financial constraints because of the costs of accommodation, transport, food, clothing, and educational materials (Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024). The cost of living is another factor that increases financial pressure (Shah et al., 2019), especially for students living in large cities, where basic necessities can be expensive. Even in countries where students are permitted to work, their earnings may not be sufficient to meet their living costs. Combining work and study may also distract students from their studies and hinder academic achievement or lead to withdrawal from university (Istrate et al., 2020).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ADJUSTMENT STRATEGIES

Gill (2021) explains adjustment as one of the strategies used to manage difficulties encountered in a new environment. Studies have found that international students who want to succeed in the host country need to employ various adjustment strategies (Alshammari et al., 2023). In a new environment, adapting to the host country's norms and culture, relating to local students, making friends with local and international students, and participating in social and community activities have been found to facilitate social integration (Alshammari et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2015). International students need to understand academic demands from the outset, such as workload, grading styles, the host university's examination methods, and research requirements (Fabeku, 2024). This may help alleviate the stress that results from a lack of preparation (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). The literature identifies language challenges as a major source of difficulty for international students (Alasmari, 2023; Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Students may address these challenges by taking language

classes to improve their proficiency in the host country's language (Babushko et al., 2022), as well as by talking to local people, watching local films, and listening to local music (Alshammari et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2019).

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The general objective of the study is to explore the challenges faced by international students and their adjustment strategies at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the challenges faced by international students at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM).

2. Understand the adjustment strategies employed by international students at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM).

METHOD

Qualitative research provides researchers with a means of exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to particular events or situations, unlike quantitative research. The aim of qualitative studies is to learn about a problem or situation from participants' perspectives and obtain detailed information (Creswell, 2009). As Tavakol and Sandars (2025) suggest, a phenomenological approach can help researchers explore human experiences and gain a fuller understanding of the meanings respondents ascribe to complex issues, including medical or educational experiences. These meanings may be difficult to quantify using a quantitative approach.

The study purposively targeted international students from various countries who were enrolled in undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programmes at the Federal University of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (see Table 1). Participants were identified through an international student WhatsApp group, and the group administrators gave permission for the researcher to contact them after the study's objectives had been explained. They were invited by phone or WhatsApp message and asked to consent to taking part. Thirteen of the 33 members of the international students' group agreed to partake. Participants were included if they were full-time international students enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programmes and had a basic understanding of Portuguese. Exchange students and students from Latin American countries were excluded because their cultures were considered similar to that of Brazil (see Table 1). For ethical reasons (Creswell, 2009), all were given a consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and risks. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence and were given an opportunity to ask questions before signing the form. Participation was voluntary, and no financial incentive was offered.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

S/N	ID	Gender	Country	Language	Education level	Course	Year in Host Institution
1	P1	Male	Haiti	French	Undergrad.	Chemical Processing	3 yrs
2	P2	Male	Ghana	English	Undergrad.	Chemical Engineering	2 yrs
3	P3	Female	Ghana	English	Undergrad.	Chemical Processing	2 yrs
4	P4	Female	Benin	French	Undergrad.	Administration	1 yr 6 mths
5	P5	Female	Nigeria	English	Undergrad.	Visual Art	3 yrs
6	P6	Female	Congo	French	Undergrad.	Telecommunications Engineer	3 yrs
7	P7	Male	Guinea-Bissau	Portuguese	Master	Education	9 mths
8	P8	Female	Nigeria	English	Doctorate	Genetical Molecular Biology	2 yrs
9	P9	Female	Nigeria	English	Doctorate	Genetical Molecular Biology	2 yrs
10	P10	Female	Haiti	French	Undergrad.	Dentistry	2 yrs 6 mths
11	P11	Male	Mozambique	Portuguese	Doctorate	Education	2 yrs
12	P12	Male	Guinea-Bissau	Portuguese	Doctorate	Education	2 yrs
13	P13	Female	Timor-Leste	Portuguese	Undergrad.	Law	3 yrs

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect information (Creswell, 2009). Seven open-ended questions were designed in line with the study's objectives and aimed to obtain detailed information about challenges and experiences in their new environment. Interviews were arranged at times agreed with participants and lasted approximately one hour each. They took place in familiar settings, in classrooms or at their homes, and were conducted in Portuguese before being translated into English by the researcher. The interview process began with standard instructions and an explanation of the interview guide (Creswell, 2009). Two senior members of the researcher's department reviewed the interview guide, using their experience and expertise to assess its accuracy and suitability. The data collected were transcribed manually and analysed thematically using the six-phase method described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which identifies, analyses, and reports patterns in the data in order to organise the dataset in detail.

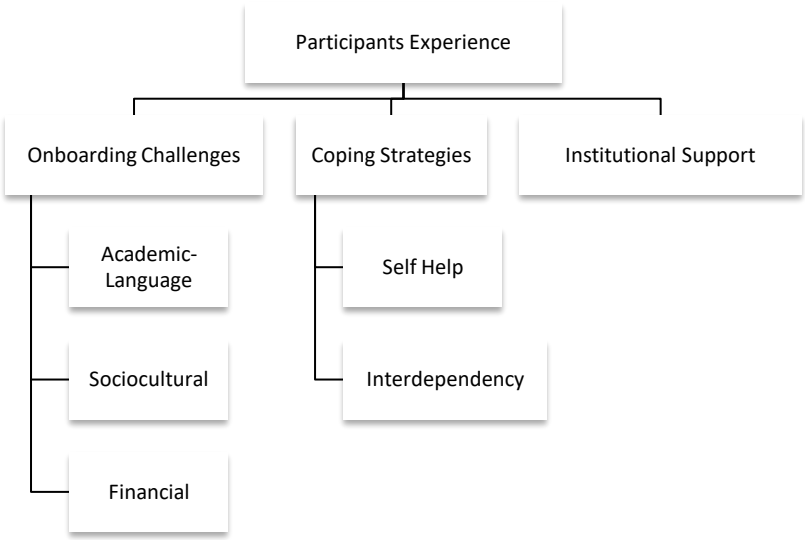
1. "Familiarising with the data" – the researcher read and reread the data several times to become familiar with it and understand the interview material.

2. “Generating initial codes” – codes were generated by grouping similar responses under the same category.
3. “Searching for themes” – the researcher identified themes that represented the initial codes.
4. “Reviewing themes” – each theme was reviewed to check its consistency with the coded data and the entire dataset. To ensure their validity, two senior members of the researcher’s department also reviewed the codes and themes.
5. “Defining and naming themes” – the researcher described and named the themes: onboarding challenges, coping strategies, and institutional support.
6. “Producing the report” – in this final stage, the researcher extracted data for analysis and selected evidence for each theme.
   (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-93)

RESULTS

The study explored the challenges faced by international students and their adjustment strategies at the Federal University of Santa Maria in Brazil. Three main themes were identified from participants’ experiences (see Figure 1). The first theme, ‘onboarding challenges’, highlighted the difficulties they faced in the country and at their host university. The second theme, ‘coping strategies’, discussed the strategies adopted to confront these challenges. The third theme, ‘institutional support’, described the support respondents received from the university to cope with the new environment. Pseudonyms or generic names were used in reporting the findings to protect respondents’ identities.

Figure 1
International students’ experiences at the Federal University of Santa Maria



Source: Conceptualised by the author.

THEME 1: ONBOARDING CHALLENGES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UFSM

Participants stated that they were motivated to study at UFSM by the good infrastructure available at the university and the opportunities it offered. One respondent explained: "My motivation stems from the university's reputation among higher education institutions in Latin America, as well as from the opportunity it offers me to fulfil a childhood dream." (P1, male student). Despite their initial motivation, interviewees described challenges that affected their experience. Their responses were divided into three categories: (i) academic and language-related, (ii) sociocultural, and (iii) financial. Regarding academic and language-related challenges, eleven respondents reported difficulties arising from the language of instruction, lecturers' teaching styles, and the pace of communication. These difficulties made it harder to understand concepts and terminology and could slow students' adjustment.

> Adapting to the teaching and learning style at UFSM has been both challenging and enriching. Coming from Ghana, where the language of instruction is English, the biggest adjustment has been dealing with Portuguese in classes, exams and course materials. Sometimes it can be difficult to fully understand complex scientific concepts in a second language. (P2, male student)

One participant said that "language difference limits my academic experience, not understanding the language made the number of academic activities such as seminars and conferences, I wish to participate limited" (P9, female student). Others reported that the speed at which native speakers spoke was a major difficulty. Communication barriers can make it difficult for students to meet academic expectations, ask lecturers and classmates questions for clarification, and participate actively in academic activities.

> It is very challenging because the teaching style here is not the same as in my country. Professors expect a lot of participation, and sometimes I am not confident enough to speak in Portuguese. But little by little, I start to adapt. My biggest challenges are the language, sometimes I don't understand the lectures especially when professors speak fast, writing assignment and preparing for exams in another language is also stressful. Also, the way the courses are organized is different from what I was used to. (P3, female student)

The language barrier faced by international students at UFSM was not experienced in the same way by everyone. Some participants from Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as some students who had learned Portuguese before starting their programmes, reported difficulty understanding certain expressions because of differences in accent.

> I have been adapting really well to the teaching and learning style, however, one of the principal academic challenges I had was the language. Although, I learnt Portuguese in Paraiba Nordeste (North East), I had difficulty in understanding some of my professors in

> my faculty because the Nordeste (North East) and Sul (South) accent are quite different. (P5, female student)

Language challenges are central to adjustment at the university and in the surrounding community. If students have difficulty becoming proficient in the language used in their new environment, integrating into academic life may also be difficult.

Regarding finances, all respondents reported experiencing financial difficulties, although some said they received government scholarships while others did not.

> I do have financial difficulties, because I didn't have a job, much less a scholarship. It's not easy to manage what I have, but financially, I'm not stable and depend on family support, which sometimes is there and sometimes isn't, and I don't cover my expenses. In fact, I've faced and I am still facing great challenges and difficulties with the cost of living. (P7, male student)

Financial challenges may arise from the high cost of living, accommodation, transport, essential equipment and course materials, food, and other basic necessities. One participant explained:

> I do have financial difficulties since I am not registered under any form of scholarship. After moving to Brazil, I was sponsored by my family for a year, got tired of asking them for money, I therefore had to do minimal jobs online. Things were going smoothly until the cost of groceries skyrocketed. (P5, female student)

One participant reported that "the exchange rate is another factor that makes the financial challenge more pronounced" (P11, male student). This means that students may lose a substantial part of the limited family support they receive because of exchange-rate differences between their home and host countries.

> I can't work because I have a monthly stipend, but I share part of it with my family back home and I have to keep some to pay for the return ticket, which has been quite challenging due to its high cost. (P3, female student)

Respondents also described sociocultural challenges and difficulties integrating into the culture and student life at UFSM. Seven interviewees reported difficulties forming friendships or social networks. They felt that local residents were reserved and reluctant to interact with foreigners, which hindered their integration into the local culture.

> … is quite different from other regions of Brazil, as here in Santa Maria people's character is more individualistic. In Santa Maria, it's difficult to build a full friendship, especially with the natives. This leads to divisions even in the classroom, with Brazilian students and African students separated from each other in the classroom. (P11, male student)

Most interviewees also identified differences in food as one of the challenges they faced, since the majority came from Africa. Positive sociocultural experiences are important for international students' integration, well-being, and resilience, both within and outside the academic environment. A lack of such experiences can create further challenges for these students.

THEME 2: COPING STRATEGIES

The second theme focused on the strategies used to manage these challenges and adjust to the university environment. Two strategies were identified: (i) self-help and (ii) interdependence.

Concerning the first strategy, respondents described managing the challenges they faced through resilience, self-determination, and self-development. They also set academic and personal goals to stay motivated when situations were difficult. These were the self-help strategies used by the students.

Regarding the second strategy, participants said they sought support from friends, classmates, and fellow international students who shared similar experiences or had faced similar challenges.

Learning from others' experiences can help students find solutions to the challenges they encounter. In this study, interviewees drew on the experiences shared by others to better understand how to confront the challenges they faced in the new environment and adjust. They also reported taking part in activities such as church groups, student groups, and sports to manage stress.

To cope with academic and language-related challenges, students reported spending extra time studying outside class, using videos and online materials, and asking classmates for explanations when possible. They said they read more in Portuguese to improve their vocabulary, used applications such as Duolingo to learn Portuguese, watched Brazilian films, and sometimes asked others to speak more slowly.

> Mainly, the strategy has been to have a positive mindset towards the language barrier. To see it has an opportunity to learn each course twice. I had to prepare for classes in advance so that I could stay ahead of the curve, and whenever I had any doubts, I spoke to my professors, who were able to help me (P8, female student)

Respondents said they planned their expenses carefully and avoided unnecessary spending. They sometimes shared meals with friends, bought items at cheaper markets, and bought in bulk to avoid frequent shopping. One participant reported: "I plan for each month to make things easier; balancing my expenses and income while ensuring affordable accommodation are strategies I use to manage my finances" (P9, female student). Other strategies included managing time, keeping in touch with family and friends back home, going for walks, listening to music, resting at weekends, and taking care of their mental health.

> It's really not easy. Only those who have experienced it know how deeply I miss my family and friends, as well as my own way of life and culture. To cope with this, whenever I have

time, I try to find a colleague or relative to talk to, which helps me relax mentally. (P7, male student)

One participant reported that "I was able to adapt to Brazilian culture by respecting it in order to practice my own culture" (P4, female student). Others described attending local events, spending time with local people, learning about local food and customs, and meeting new people as strategies for adjusting to sociocultural differences.

THEME 3: INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The third theme concerned the support the institution put in place to help international students adjust and confront the challenges they faced. All participants reported that institutional support had been helpful to some extent. Their accounts suggest that the institution understands the challenges international students face. Respondents described how professors provided guidance and departmental staff helped them when they encountered difficulties. They also used information and resources provided by the university's international office and took part in get-togethers and events that brought local and international students together.

> UFSM has supported my adjustment by providing student housing, orientation programmes and assistance through the international office. Professors and staff have also generally been supportive when I explain the challenges I face. However, I feel that more financial support is still needed for international students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, as well as more structured Portuguese-language support for academic purposes. (P2, male student)

One participant explained that "institutional support had not only helped international students adjust but also enabled them to learn more about Brazilian culture", although some participants also expressed concerns about shortcomings.

> During my adaptation process, I actually received guidance from DRI[2] and PROGRAD[3] through an online meeting that explained the BSE[4], student housing and other aspects of the university. Overall, I believe what is missing is a change in policy. That is, PRAE[5] could consider how to best welcome international students. I found the process quite complicated when the final list of students eligible for housing was released. International students have to visit the offices asking whether accommodation is available and then have to undergo an interview with other students already living there. On several occasions, they are then rejected on the grounds of incompatibility. I believe this is an area that needs improvement. (P7, male student)

[2] Diretoria de Relações Internacionais.
[3] Pró-Reitoria de Graduação.
[4] Benefício Socioeconômico.
[5] Pró-Reitoria de Assuntos Estudantis.
Al notes in portuguese language.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the challenges experienced by international students at the Federal University of Santa Maria and the coping strategies they adopted. The challenges identified included academic and language-related, financial, and sociocultural difficulties. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that international students face multiple challenges in their new environments (Alasmari, 2023; Chen et al., 2019; Wong & Hyde, 2024). Although the challenges encountered may form part of students' first experience of studying abroad, reflecting on this experience may help them appreciate life from a perspective different from that of their home country (Kerschbaumer et al., 2023; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Participants' academic adjustment and performance were closely related to the language of instruction. When students have difficulty understanding the language used in class, they may also struggle to follow the academic content. This supports existent literature that identifies language barriers as a major source of academic difficulty for international students (Halali et al., 2022; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Volkova & Kolesov, 2021). The students also reported differences in teaching and learning styles, communication, curricula, and academic settings. These findings are consistent with earlier studies on the challenges international students face in teaching and learning contexts (Park et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2015; Xiao et al., 2010). According to Cubillo et al. (2006), international students' motivations may be based on personal reasons and perceptions of the host country, city, institution, and programme. The findings suggest that students may arrive without sufficient prior knowledge of the academic context and the challenges awaiting them in the new environment. Interviewees also reported financial difficulties arising from the cost of living, limited financial support and scholarship opportunities, accommodation, groceries, and educational resources, in accordance with previous research (Kumsa et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2019; Tajvar et al., 2024). Financial difficulties may affect international students' adjustment when they cannot afford basic necessities, potentially distracting them from their academic goals and affecting their well-being.

The findings also showed that participants experienced sociocultural challenges. Some reported that local residents were reserved, which made it difficult to integrate and develop a sense of belonging or to make friends. Sherry et al. (2010) suggest that local students may not always understand the culture of international students, which may contribute to social distance and create difficulties for international students. Differences in food and other cultural practices also contributed to the challenges students encountered. This echoes earlier studies showing that international students experience sociocultural challenges in their new environments (Alshammari et al., 2023; Baumert et al., 2024; Hommadova, 2017; Lan, 2020). Such challenges may limit cross-cultural interaction and make it harder to develop a sense of belonging, which is important for integration into the host community (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Adjustment to changes, new conditions, situations, and environments is important for the psychological and emotional well-being of international students. The responses showed that they managed the challenges they faced through self-help, interdependence, and institutional support, both at the university and in the host community.

Adjusting to challenges requires individuals to use suitable strategies to overcome or mitigate their effects. Respondents' self-help strategies were associated with their sense of self-determination, autonomy, and motivation, consistent with previous research (Ding & Yu, 2021; Jin et al., 2022; Wang, 2009). Self-determination, motivation, and autonomy may help participants accept the challenges posed by a new

environment and develop ways to deal with them. A self-help strategy does not mean that challenges are absent; rather, it is a way of recognising and managing them while continuing to pursue one's objectives. Rivas et al. (2019) highlight the importance of social connectedness and belonging for international students' social and cultural integration in a new environment.

The results showed that international students managed the challenges they faced by keeping in touch with friends and family back home, partly because they found it difficult to bond with local people. This reflects the interdependence strategy adopted and is consistent with previous research (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Robertson, 2018; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). Sam and Berry (2010) discuss acculturation in terms of two factors: psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation concerns individuals' satisfaction and emotional and psychological well-being, whereas sociocultural adaptation concerns the skills individuals acquire to live effectively in a new sociocultural environment. This study showed that international students developed strategies and skills to adapt to the difficulties posed by the new environment in order to ensure their goals are being realized.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlights challenges that may affect international students' academic achievement, persistence, and outcomes at university. International students from different sociocultural, academic, and linguistic backgrounds are likely to face some challenges in a new environment (Wong & Hyde, 2024). Reducing the challenges identified in this study may make adjustment easier and help students achieve their academic objectives. The findings suggest that the university should further develop support systems for international students, particularly as Brazil has become an increasingly popular destination for them. Recommendations include providing accommodation, which was identified as a major source of financial difficulty. Since Portuguese is the language of communication in the country and the language of instruction at the university, more structured language courses should be provided and made compulsory for international students before classes begin or as part of their course credits. Intercultural programmes should also be created within the university and its departments to enable local and international students to interact and develop a sense of belonging. The university's Institutional Development Plan (PDI) 2016–2026, which supports internationalisation, should be reviewed to ensure that it meets current needs. Supporting international students' adjustment is important for helping them remain part of the university community.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study explored the challenges faced by international students at the Federal University of Santa Maria and their adjustment strategies. The results showed that academic and language-related, sociocultural, and financial difficulties were among the challenges they faced. To address these challenges, participants used strategies such as self-help, interdependence, and institutional support to adjust and pursue their

academic goals. Interviewees reported that the university provided some support to improve their experience. However, greater awareness of the challenges international students face, and of the support they need, is required across the academic community to help them remain at the university and support the broader objectives of expanding access to education. The study aims to raise awareness among the university community, including management, professors, faculty staff, and the international office, of the remaining gaps in support for international students' adjustment.

LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted with a small sample of international students at only one of the university's four campuses. This limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the experiences of all international students at that campus or at the university's other campuses. In addition, the researcher was an international student at the university where the research was conducted, which may have introduced personal bias or influenced data interpretation. To minimise this possibility, the findings were shared with respondents so that they could check whether the interpretations reflected their experiences. Future research could include more participants and use mixed methods to investigate the experiences of international students across all campuses, as these experiences may not be adequately captured by a single quantitative or qualitative approach.

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