

Where Internationalisation Meets Well-being: How Domestic Students Experience International Character of the University

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Abstract

This study investigates how domestic students perceive internationalisation in relation to their well-being. Using the participatory PhotoVoice method, we capture deeply visualised viewpoints that foreground the interplay between visual depictions and narrative reflections of students' experiences. Our aim is to contribute to the international discourse on internationalisation through the lens of domestic students exposed to it, a perspective still underrepresented. Based on preliminary findings from one Slovak university, results suggest that students link the university's international character to positive feelings and a sense of unique opportunity—being culturally enriched, learning more about the world, and expanding social and linguistic horizons. Preliminary interpretations indicate that, for many domestic students, the university constitutes a primary space of intercultural encounter, typically experienced as positive, inclusive, and cohesive. The study thus adds evidence to current discussions in teacher education and supports student-centred institutional practices that intentionally foster everyday intercultural contact and well-being.

Keywords: *Internationalisation; well-being; domestic students; PhotoVoice.*

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has become a central force shaping higher education, often defined as the purposeful integration of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the core functions of universities (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2014). Recent scholarship underscores that internationalisation is not a uniform process but is shaped by global conflict, shifting mobility patterns, and changing institutional priorities (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Jones & de Wit, 2022; de Wit, 2023). These dynamics are evident in Central Europe. In Slovakia, the number of international students has grown rapidly—from 6,600 in 2016 to 19,500 in 2023—representing

17% of total enrolments in 2024 (Ministry of Education, 2024; OECD, 2023). This trend highlights the structural significance of internationalisation for Slovak higher education. However, research on how domestic students understand and experience internationalisation remains limited. This gap is important, as societal attitudes toward cultural diversity in Slovakia tend to be cautious; positive perceptions are more often associated with culturally proximate or economically advantageous groups (Drál' et al., 2011). Such attitudes may influence how students interpret the increasingly international character of their universities. International literature shows that diverse learning environments can support cognitive, social, and civic development (Moss, 2018), yet structural features—such as the separation of international students into foreign language programmes—may reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction and contribute to perceptions of unequal conditions (Hall et al., 2019). While such structures also exist in Slovakia, little is known about how domestic students make sense of them or how these perceptions relate to their well-being.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines how domestic students conceptualise and experience their well-being within an internationalising university environment. Using visual and narrative data generated through PhotoVoice, the study explores how students perceive the international character of their university and how they represent the relationship between internationalisation and well-being. Preliminary interpretations indicate that, for many domestic students, the university constitutes a primary space where intercultural encounters occur and that these encounters are often experienced in a positive, inclusive, and cohesive way. The study thus contributes to current discussions on internationalisation in teacher education and offers evidence to support more student-centred institutional practices.

2. Methodology

2.1. Aim and Research question

The aim of the study is to explore how domestic students conceptualise and experience their well-being within an increasingly international university environment, and how they perceive the university's international character as shaping their everyday academic and social life. Accordingly, the study responds to the primary research question: How do domestic students visually and narratively represent the relationship between their well-being and the international character of the university?

2.2. Participants

The research involved 40 domestic preservice teacher education students enrolled in the second and third year of bachelor's studies at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University Bratislava. The sample reflected the gender composition typical of teacher education

programmes, with women predominating ($N = 37$)—a long-term trend observed in Slovakia (OECD, 2024) and globally (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). Participation was voluntary and conducted during scheduled university teaching sessions. Prior to data collection, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to all participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Assessment Commission of the Faculty of Education, Comenius University Bratislava (No. 8/2025).

2.3. Research Design

A qualitative research design was applied using PhotoVoice, a participatory visual method that positions students as co-researchers and enables them to document and interpret their lived experiences through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). The method is particularly effective for representing abstract concepts—such as well-being, belonging, and internationalisation—in tangible visual form and has been increasingly used in university-based studies (Ünsal Seydooğulları, 2023; Luescher et al., 2021). Data were collected during the winter semester (September–December 2025). Students were instructed to photograph situations, objects, or environments illustrating how the international character of the university influenced their well-being. Each participant submitted two photographs, each accompanied by a title and a short narrative responding to four reflective questions derived from the SHOWeD analytical framework (Wang & Burris, 1997): (1) Why this photograph? (2) What do you want to say with it? (3) What message do you want to convey to others? (4) What do you want to draw attention to? All submissions were uploaded to a secure online platform and anonymised prior to analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

A total of 80 photographs and accompanying narratives were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, a denotative analysis was conducted to map the explicit visual content of the photographs and to establish broad organisational categories that structured the subsequent interpretive work. These categories served as an initial descriptive scaffold rather than a primary object of inquiry. The core analytical focus of the study lay in the connotative level, which explored the implicit meanings emerging through thematic, contextual, and relational analysis of the visual and narrative material. Emphasis was placed on this level of interpretation because the ways in which internationalisation shapes domestic students' well-being often operate beneath the surface of explicit visual content and become visible only through deeper interpretive analysis. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers to enhance analytic rigour. Codes and themes were compared, and discrepancies were resolved through reflective discussion until consensus was achieved. Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365) was used to organise the dataset, while Dedoose (Version 10.0.25) supported the connotative level qualitative analysis.

3. Results

Analysis of the visual and narrative data revealed two complementary layers of meaning. Although the denotative layer did not constitute the primary analytical focus of the study, its systematic examination was essential for establishing the empirical baseline from which the deeper connotative meanings could be interpreted. In this sense, the denotative analysis functioned as a necessary descriptive scaffold, grounding the interpretive insights in the explicit visual content selected by participants. Emerging themes were derived through iterative coding conducted independently by two researchers and subsequently refined through comparison until consensus was reached.

At the denotative level, focused on the explicit content of the 80 photographs, seven thematic areas were identified (Table 1). Forty-one percent of images contained a direct link to internationalisation—such as foreign language inscriptions or references to international projects—while 59% captured everyday spaces and activities (e.g., buildings, food, social gatherings). These patterns indicate that students visually associate the university's international character and their own well-being primarily with interpersonal relationships, linguistic elements, shared routines and familiar academic environments, rather than with formal institutional markers.

Table 1. Frequency of themes in students' photographs- denotative analysis

Themes of denotative analysis	Number of occurrences	Examples of displayed objects/people
University premises and infrastructure	15	Buildings, entrances, campus, classrooms, study rooms, library
Joint student activities	14	Students hanging out at a bar, having coffee, hiking, singing karaoke, taking selfies together
Language and multilingual dimension	13	Books, texts, and studying in a foreign language; multilingual signs and information
Representations of international students	11	Individuals or groups in which persons with international student status are present
Daily activities – food, rest, exercise	11	Food, drinks, city objects such as fountains, streets, buildings
Symbols, values and artistic elements	9	The word "tolerance" in different languages; people join hands in a circle, symbolises unity, teamwork, solidarity; art objects without linguistic context
International programmes and institutional frameworks	7	Bulletin boards, flyers with information about programs such as Erasmus+ or Blended Intensive Programmes

At the connotative level, the 80 written narratives revealed six themes (Table 2) that expanded the meanings suggested by the photographs. Narratives written in response to the SHOWeD

prompts formed the basis of the connotative themes. Across the dataset, narratives emphasised positive emotions, belonging, cooperation and shared academic life, suggesting that domestic students perceive internationalisation as a normal and integrated part of everyday university experience rather than as an exceptional phenomenon. The university was described as a multicultural space enabling encounters, learning and growth for both domestic and international students and staff. Themes of intercultural belonging, positive relationships and mutual enrichment illustrate how cultural diversity is understood as an opportunity to broaden linguistic, social and experiential horizons without leaving Slovakia. One of the participants described such opportunities as situations in which local students actively help and support their international peers thereby benefiting from the "international atmosphere" in their home environment.

"It is heartening to see domestic students voluntarily helping international students feel welcome. At the same time, this brings benefits to domestic students as well—they can form new friendships with international peers and explore different cultures without having to leave their own country." (ML5BS)

Table 2. Themes in photographs identified by connotative analysis with their links to denotative categories

Themes of connotative analysis	Content of the topic	Connection to themes from denotative analysis (strong semantic link*)
Intercultural belonging and positive relationships	belonging, cooperation, friendships, tolerance, respect, empathy, acceptance	Joint student activities Representations of international students Symbols, values and artistic elements
The university as a multicultural space enabling encounter, learning and growth	the university as a centre of diversity, a place of connection, a space for joint activities, joint projects, international teachers, international publications	University premises and infrastructure Joint student activities
Cultural diversity and mutual enrichment	getting to know cultures, sharing experiences and values, peer learning	Language and multilingual dimension
Symbolic representations of internationalisation and well-being	food, rituals, internationalisation as freedom, nature as a symbol of harmony	University premises and infrastructure Joint student activities Daily activities – food, rest, exercise Symbols, values and artistic elements
The shared academic journey as a source of connection	study as a goal, preparation for a future profession, the content of the student role	International programmes and institutional frameworks
Challenges and barriers to intercultural integration	language barriers, feeling lost in the environment and language, segregated education	Language and multilingual dimension

* A strong semantic link means a clear, direct correspondence between what the photograph shows, and the meaning expressed in the student's narrative.

Mentions of difficulties were present but limited. Students referred mainly to linguistic barriers and the structural separation of study programmes, which occasionally restricted deeper interaction. A comment by one of the participants (ML44FOH) explains how language-based segregation within accredited study programs can unintentionally create a sense of distance between domestic and international students, especially if it leads to their permanent separation.

"Similarly to the students who come to us but, due to various circumstances, often end up separated. In some ways this unsettles me; I feel a sense of discomfort when I see it, yet it is not something I currently have the time or energy to change." (ML44FOH)

These examples, although relevant, formed a minor portion of the narratives, reinforcing the predominant perception of everyday cooperation as the core of intercultural contact.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Existing research shows that domestic students' perspectives on internationalisation are largely overlooked in policy and institutional strategies (Cunningham et al., 2025). While the experiences of international students are well documented, studies highlight that domestic students benefit from intercultural encounters through increased well-being, belonging and the development of intercultural competences (Marangell, 2023; Dong et al., 2024; Bergman et al., 2024). These benefits, however, depend on meaningful interaction rather than the mere presence of diversity (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019; Sampson, 2019).

Our findings reflect several of these patterns. Domestic students described the international character of the university mainly as a positive and supportive aspect of their everyday life, contributing to belonging, social connection and opportunities for linguistic and cultural enrichment. At the same time, they recognised structural elements that may limit deeper interaction—particularly linguistic barriers and the separation of study programmes. Although these appeared only occasionally in the narratives, they indicate awareness of the ways institutional arrangements shape the accessibility of intercultural encounters. Evidence suggests that the benefits of internationalization are unevenly experienced across students, with openness, linguistic self-confidence and disciplinary context shaping their engagement (Alexiadou et al., 2024).

The combination of visual and narrative data revealed a relational understanding of internationalisation, rooted in everyday spaces, shared activities and informal peer interactions rather than in formal strategies or institutional symbols. Photographs highlighted the settings where encounters occur, while narratives articulated their emotional and social significance. This alignment suggests that internationalisation at home can strengthen well-being when embedded in routine academic and social life.

These insights point to several implications for practice. Universities can enhance interaction by supporting shared learning spaces, mixed-group activities and informal events that facilitate contact between domestic and international students. Addressing minor structural barriers—such as language-related challenges or programme separation—may further increase opportunities for engagement without requiring major systemic change. It is equally important to strengthen the systematic professional development of educators in facilitating culturally and linguistically diverse student groups. In parallel, further research should examine how intercultural interactions influence domestic students' academic achievement, the development of critical and reflective thinking, as well as the formation of key professional competencies.

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