



## POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING FOREIGN STUDENTS IN GREECE: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF IOANNINA

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### Abstract:

This study examines how foreign students experience studying at Greek universities and how institutional policies support—or fail to support—their integration. Based on semi-structured interviews, the research explores students' perceptions of language, cultural adaptation, and institutional practices. The findings reveal that although Greece has introduced policies promoting internationalization, their implementation remains weak. Support for foreign students is fragmented and mostly informal, depending on personal relationships rather than organized structures. Language barriers, bureaucracy, and financial difficulties are major obstacles to academic success and inclusion. The study concludes that Greek universities still operate within a monocultural framework that places the burden of adaptation on students themselves. To achieve genuine inclusion, institutions must provide systematic language support, mentoring, intercultural training, and accessible information services.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, issues related to the internationalization of higher education have been the focus of attention for educational policymakers and have been the subject of research and educational planning (Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005; Larsen, 2016; Hawawini, 2016; Williams & Lee, 2015; Engwall, 2023). The internationalization process has become increasingly important due to globalization, the mobility of students and academics, and the competitiveness of universities in international rankings (Delgado-Márquez, Hurtado-Torres & Bondar, 2011). Policymakers and institutions aim to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into education, research, and service functions (Knight, 2004; De Wit, 2011). Recent studies also highlight the need for critical reflection on how internationalization affects curriculum design, academic values, and equity in higher education (Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005; Williams & Lee, 2015).

The design of educational policy for higher education includes the creation and implementation of national strategies aimed at promoting the country as an international destination by attracting foreign students (Law 4009/2011, Law 44485/2017). The internationalization of higher education does not only involve policies to attract foreign students but also a transformation of universities' institutional habitus—the internalized values, norms, and practices that shape how institutions perceive and manage diversity (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay *et al.*, 2001). In this sense, the internationalization process is not merely quantitative but also cultural and structural, requiring a redefinition of what is considered the "norm" within academic environments.

In this study, the term "foreign student" refers to a student who is not usually of Greek origin and has not attended Greek primary and secondary education but has had access to Greek higher education. The international character of university institutions aims to contribute to the universality of the knowledge produced and to the promotion of intercultural education. The intercultural dimension emerges as an emerging need and is related to the implementation of new pedagogical interventions, which represent significant changes in educational practices so that the new multicultural identity of Greek education can be restructured against its hitherto monocultural perspective (Zagkos, Kyridis & Fotopoulos, 2019; Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003). Efforts to eliminate social exclusion and promote equal opportunities also fall within this framework (Riddell & Weedon, 2014).

The interest and originality of the research lie in two findings. Firstly, there is a relatively small number of foreign students enrolled in Greek higher education, despite international developments that require our country to follow the procedures set out in the European Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). Specifically, recent Eurostat data (2025) on the percentage of foreign students in each of the 28 member states shows that the percentage of foreign students enrolled in higher education institutions in our

country amounted to approximately 3% for the year 2023, a percentage much lower than the European average, which stood at 8.4% (1.76 million). More specifically, Greece ranks among the bottom three countries, along with Spain (4.3%) and Croatia (3.7%), while the top spots are occupied by Luxembourg (52.3%), Cyprus (22.3%), and Malta (29.6%).

Despite the growing international literature on the experiences of international students, research in Greece remains limited, particularly regarding how institutional cultures and support structures shape students' academic and social integration. Existing Greek studies focus primarily on primary and secondary education or on migration in general (e.g., Georgakopoulos, 2019; Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011), leaving a gap in understanding the institutional habitus of universities and its impact on foreign students' trajectories. This study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of foreign students at the University of Ioannina and exploring how institutional practices facilitate or hinder their inclusion through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of *institutional habitus*.

## 2. Literature Review

Internationally, numerous studies examining the academic progress of students in educational systems with a highly heterogeneous student population have concluded that socioeconomic background is a determining factor in students' academic progress (Bowden & Doughney, 2010; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014). Recent studies show that the internationalization of higher education is increasingly evaluated through students' lived experiences (Marginson, 2018; Bista & Foster, 2016). Gang and Zimmermann (2000) conducted research in Germany and studied the integration of second-generation immigrants into the education system. They found that ethnicity plays an important role in performance as it is linked to different educational experiences. Van Ours and Veenman (2003) conducted similar research in the Netherlands and found that the low performance of second-generation immigrants is due to the low educational level of their parents. In general, research leads to the conclusion that the dynamics of immigrant families and their background are important in determining the educational success of their children. Specifically, the characteristics that help determine the success of foreign students at university are parental education, academic preparation, age of arrival in the country of study, and the university admission process (Baum & Flores, 2011).

In Greece, the number of studies is limited for the tertiary education level (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011). The limited literature shows that students from different backgrounds encounter several difficulties at university. Initially, Georgakopoulos (2019) concluded that second-generation foreign students of immigrant origin are likely to have developed a "hybrid" cultural identity, as they do not reject forming friendships with their compatriots. Furthermore, the findings of the same study show that the Greek education system did not help the participants to integrate into Greek society, as there is no organized and systematic effort on its part to address the difficulties and take into account the specific learning needs. The research by Milesi (2004), which looked at Albanian students, concluded that language difficulties play a decisive role in students'

academic progress. The Center for Planning and Economic Research conducted a study entitled "*The paths of young migrants in education and the labor market*" (Kavounidi & Cholezas, 2013) with the aim of investigating the path taken by young people of migrant origin in the country's education system and labor market. The study focuses on comparing individual groups of students of migrant origin with native students. The research revealed a large gap, which is largely due to socioeconomic and ethnic factors. Kontogianni (2012) also investigated the relationship between the social background of foreign students and their participation in Greek higher education. She studied the factors related to their decision to enroll in Greek higher education institutions and found that this depends on social background, which influences and determines individuals' educational paths both in their country of origin and in the host country. One of her most important findings is that school can act as a lever of resistance and determine students' educational paths, which are not predetermined by their national origin. The literature provides evidence that makes it important to study the support foreign students receive in order to reduce the "academic gap", which is largely due to socioeconomic factors. The above findings align with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and cultural capital, which explain how social background shapes students' adaptation and success in higher education. Students' prior educational experiences and family capital influence how well their personal *habitus* aligns with the institutional *habitus* of universities. Institutions that implicitly reflect middle-class norms tend to reproduce rather than reduce educational inequalities. The purpose of this study is to investigate foreign students' perceptions of support policies and practices at Greek universities and to propose improvement measures to enhance their integration.

### 3. Theoretical Background

This study employs Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and its institutional variation to explain how social background and educational environments shape students' experiences in higher education (HE). *Individual habitus*—formed through family, education, and culture—both structures and is restructured by experience, influencing how individuals perceive what is valuable and possible. *Institutional habitus* represents how the culture, structure, and ethos of institutions mediate these dispositions, linking personal agency to social structure (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2010; Burke & Crozier, 2015; Jin & Ball, 2019)

Research shows that different universities attract students whose *habitus* aligns with the institution's ethos (Thomas, 2002). Privileged students tend to access elite institutions more smoothly, while disadvantaged students face transitional struggles and often experience a "divided *habitus*" between their working-class identity and academic aspirations (Thomas, 2002; Jin & Ball, 2019). Despite widening participation policies, inequalities persist, and institutional structures often reinforce rather than reduce class-based divisions. Studies (e.g., Reay, Crozier & Clayton) demonstrate that the institutional *habitus* plays a crucial role in shaping working-class students' trajectories—either supporting or constraining them. Admission practices and institutional hierarchies often

disadvantage non-traditional students, perpetuating social stratification within HE. In the context of Greek higher education, the institutional habitus is characterized by a historically monocultural ethos, where diversity is treated as an exception rather than the norm. Applying this framework allows for interpreting students' narratives not merely as personal struggles but as interactions with a broader cultural structure that defines what is 'legitimate' academic behavior. Given the fact that the concept of institutional habitus focuses on how individuals interpret, negotiate and internalize the cultural norms of educational environments, a qualitative research design was considered more appropriate. Semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of how students understand their position within the institutional culture of the university, how they perceive available support structures, and how their personal habitus interacts with the institutional habitus.

#### 4. Material and Methods

This research effort, which was conducted during the 2020-2021 academic year, is a field study. Qualitative research was conducted using the semi-structured interview technique. This was followed by the transcription of the interviews through the systematic coding of the content into broader thematic categories-axes, which are analyzed in four parts: Part A - social characteristics/student profile, Part B: Reasons for migration, Part C: The journey to university, and Part D – Institutional support policies and practices. This paper focuses on Part D.

Our research sample consists of students who have been admitted through the special categories for foreign nationals at the University of Ioannina from the academic year 2010-2011 to the academic year 2019-2020. The period 2010–2020 was selected because it captures a full decade during which Greek higher education underwent significant transformations related to internationalization policies, particularly after the implementation of Laws 4009/2011 and 4485/2017. The selection of the University of Ioannina as a case study is linked to the aim of exploring how a specific institutional environment—its institutional habitus—affects the experiences of foreign students. It represents a typical example of a regional Greek university whose institutional habitus has historically been shaped by monocultural academic norms. Its limited internationalization infrastructure and the relatively small number of foreign students make it an illuminating case for exploring how institutional habitus influences students' integration. Thus, the university serves as a strategic site for examining the interaction between individual and institutional habitus in a context where support structures are still emerging. The qualitative approach allows the identification of how institutional culture, values, and structures are perceived and internalized by individuals coming from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, ensuring reflexivity and consistency in coding. After familiarization with the transcripts through repeated readings, initial codes were generated inductively to capture

meaningful features of the data related to students' experiences of institutional support, language barriers, bureaucracy, and social integration. Coding was conducted manually, and data segments were organized into a coding matrix. In the third phase, codes were grouped into broader patterns, leading to the development of preliminary themes such as "fragmented institutional support," "individualized responsibility for integration," and "cultural and linguistic challenges." These themes were then reviewed against the coded extracts and the dataset to ensure internal coherence and analytic robustness. In phase five, themes were refined and clearly defined, with attention to how they reflected the institutional habitus framework. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. Throughout the process, reflexive notes were kept, ensuring transparency and interpretive consistency.

Students were contacted individually via institutional email and invited to participate in the study. This sampling strategy ensured that the participants represented diverse cultural and educational backgrounds while sharing the key characteristic of navigating Greek higher education as foreign nationals. The final sample consisted of 11 students from various countries, reflecting variation in study level, field of study, and linguistic proficiency. They are differentiated whether they (9) were admitted to the University of Ioannina without exams, and those who are doctoral candidates (2) were admitted after a relevant announcement. Although doctoral candidates follow different academic trajectories, they were included because they also navigate the institutional structures, cultural expectations, and linguistic demands of Greek higher education as foreign nationals. Their experiences provide important comparative insights into how institutional habitus operates across different levels of study. None of the students has completed their studies. More specifically, our sample consists of 11 foreign students of various nationalities, as shown in Table 1. This number was chosen based on the representativeness ensured by the qualitative composition of the sample group, while there is no need for it to be large, as there is a risk of "information saturation." Purposeful sampling was conducted, and the sample was selected using specific criteria determined by the research questions.

The research questions presented in this study relate to Part D – Institutional support policies and practices and are as follows:

**RQ1:** What forms of institutional support do foreign students receive during their studies in Greek universities, and how do they evaluate the effectiveness of this support?

**RQ2:** Which policies and practices do foreign students perceive as enhancing—or potentially enhancing—their academic performance and social integration?

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing all identifiable personal information from transcripts. Sensitive data—particularly accounts of discrimination or racist incidents—were handled with heightened caution. These excerpts were anonymized in a way that prevents recognition of individuals or specific university units. The study received ethical approval from the Department of Philosophy Ethics Committee.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of students in the sample

	Origin	Sex	School-department	Age	Language	Education level & occupation of parents
1	Albania	I	Biological applications	21	B2	Middle school, high school (private employee, electrician)
2	Jordan	A	Medicine	21	B2	University (doctors)
3	America	I	Medicine	21	from parents	University (University professors)
4	Thailand	A	Computer Science (PhD)	32	B2 (without certification)	University (education)
5	Albania	A	Biological applications	21	B2 (few from parents)	University (police officer, teacher)
6	Albania	I	Medicine	20	B2 (few from parents)	Basic (freelancers)
7	Albania	A	Economy	21	B2	Technical training (nursing, domestic services)
8	Thailand	I	Mathematics (PhD)	34	B2 (without certification)	University (education)
9	Palestine	A	Medicine	22	B2	University (teachers)
10	Lebanon	A	Medicine	32		University (education)
11	Albania	I	Chemistry (PhD)	27	B2 (without certification)	Basic (seamstress, carpenter)

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Institutional Support

Analysis of the interviews revealed that students with a migrant background perceive the support provided by the university as limited, fragmented, and mainly informal. Most participants stated that there were no organized forms of institutional support from the institution, while information about available services was incomplete or non-existent. Specifically, most participants pointed out the limited institutional support provided by the institution to students (9 out of 11):

*"No one has helped me... I don't know if there is any kind of help. Everyone told me that there is nothing you can do... If we ask the professors for help, they tell us to manage on our own."* (student from Jordan)

Most students were unaware of the existence of support structures (e.g., psychological support, counseling services). A common point in all interviews was that students are not systematically informed about services or procedures that concern them. They point out that there is a lack of timely information about services, procedures (e.g., residence permits, housing), and support structures.

*"I would like there to be something that informs us about how to navigate the University."* (student from Jordan).

### **5.1.1 Individualization of Responsibility**

Across all interviews, students expressed the belief that adaptation is a personal responsibility rather than something supported by the institution. All students believe that the responsibility for their adaptation lies solely with them.

*"It is natural for us from other countries to have difficulties that we have to face on our own."* (student from Palestine)

*"No, it doesn't do anything (the institution to help us), but I don't expect much, what else can it do?"* (student from Albania)

### **5.1.2 Bureaucratic Challenges**

References to the problem of bureaucracy, and specifically to the issuance of student residence permits, are crucial. Most of the participants referred to such difficulties encountered when accessing the Greek higher education system:

*"Another difficulty I have is not related to the University but to the law, which requires me to renew my visa every year. Every year I have to go and get a priority number, then go back to check all the documents, then go back again to get the visa, and then go back again to ask... all this takes a month."* (student from Thailand)

### **5.1.3 Language Barriers**

All participants referred to challenges related to Greek language proficiency, particularly academic terminology. Students reported that insufficient linguistic preparation affected their participation in classes, ability to follow lectures, and confidence during exams:

*"They should help us more with languages, so we know a little of the terminology before we enter university."* (student from Albania)

*"I haven't learned Greek well yet, and I don't know the terminology."* (student from Jordan).

### **5.1.4 Social and Emotional Isolation**

They also reported that they face difficulties on their own, with limited help from staff or their Greek fellow students. Five of the 11 said they faced problems of integration and social isolation, and for seven of the 11, their integration depends more on their personal initiatives and social contacts than on institutional practices. The role of teachers was also crucial in enhancing students' academic performance. Students who felt that their teachers recognized their difficulties reported better adjustment and performance.

*"The teachers were very good. They encouraged me to move forward in life, not to look back, to work every day to improve. I want support in life—if you don't have someone to encourage you, you can't cope." (student from Albania)*

*"The teachers support me more because they know me, they know that I am from Albania and that I have more difficulties." (student from Albania)*

Regarding his fellow students, the opinions emphasize the difficulties in forming social relationships:

*"It is difficult to make friends at the university, not because of prejudice, but more because the experiences we have had are very different, and for this reason, there is a lack of common ground, so to speak, and we don't know the jokes and cultural references that are generally considered common knowledge here." (student from Palestine)*

### **5.1.5 Experiences of Discrimination**

The students referred to certain incidents they had encountered due to their differences, but they all spoke about them in mild terms and without implying that this discrimination was the reason they had abandoned their studies or become isolated. They understand and accept that they have a different culture and that it is to be expected that they will encounter difficulties because of their differences. They realize that they need to study harder and participate more often in lectures in order to integrate. Extreme is the report of a student from Jordan who transferred to another department because of the discrimination he faced. He was initially studying in Patras, but experienced racism there. He was harassed and threatened with his life by a far-right group, forcing him to transfer to the corresponding department in Ioannina.

*"At first, I went to Patras, but I experienced a lot of racism. XrissiAvgi (Golden Dawn) hunted me down and threatened my life, so I transferred to Ioannina. My father's acquaintances helped me with this. Apart from the language, when I came here, I felt very lonely. I made friends at the university, but I only hung out with some of them because I needed someone to be with. They didn't really suit me. There was also the language problem." (student from Jordan)*

Discrimination is more intense for some students and is experienced through their relationships with professors and through their social activities.

*"We don't have the same rights as Greek students. For example, I tried to apply for another dorm at the university, and they said no. The dormitory I wanted to go to is for Erasmus students, and they wouldn't let me go. I didn't like it because now [since] I'm studying in Greece, [I think] I should have the same rights as Greek students. I haven't felt discriminated against, though." (student from America)*

It is worth noting that the findings of the study showed that students have different experiences of their studies depending on their country of origin. Students from culturally closer countries (Albania) felt more accepted and had fewer difficulties adjusting, while students from more distant countries (Thailand, Jordan) reported loneliness, isolation, or fear.

*".....maybe we who come from other countries are having a little difficulty now at the beginning, trying to, um... read and participate more in classes because we need to learn the language better or get used to the way things are here because in other countries things are not the same, but in other respects we are no different from Greek students."* (student from Albania)

When asked about employment during their studies, most students (10 out of 11) said that they do not work and have not worked during their studies. Institutionally, they are not recognized as having the right to work, and there is a negative attitude towards the lack of regulations for students with financial difficulties. In the case of the student whose words are presented below, the difficulties he faced in keeping up with his studies because his parents were unable to send him money prevented him from completing his studies on time.

*"For my life, it was very positive in general, but for my studies, it was negative because here in Greece, unfortunately, there is no part-time work to live comfortably, so you have to work very hard. If you study, you cannot work part-time. In Greece, especially at the beginning of the crisis, there was no possibility of part-time work, meaning that medicine and work don't coincide, but what can we do? It's either one or the other; unfortunately, there is no middle ground. Now I work eight hours a day, and it's a little difficult with school."* (student from Lebanon)

## 5.2 Suggestions for Supporting Students

Students were asked to suggest practices for improving integration into student life and supporting foreign students. The relevant findings show that the University needs to contribute more decisively to supporting students from third countries studying at Greek universities. The findings suggest that students (11 out of 11) find the support services inadequate and that policies for the integration of foreign students need to be improved. The proposals they made concern support measures in language-related issues, such as making the institution's website and study guide available in English and translating the signs on the university campus into English.

Other proposals were also made concerning the development of infrastructure to help students with various issues that concern them, such as finding accommodation.

Among the proposals made, the need for special seminars on integration into academic life was also emphasized. These programs will include instructions on how the institution is organized and operates, how courses and lectures are conducted, and the

availability of services where foreign students can go and discuss their problems. In particular, during the first years of their studies, they need guidance from special structures where they can go to discuss their problems. They admit that they have more problems than Greeks, both because of the language and because of financial difficulties. Their progress needs to be monitored systematically so that any problems that may arise can be checked and prevented. Finally, the proposals include facilitating exams and holding seminars that provide counseling services.

*"I would suggest that a program be set up shortly before the start of the school year so that foreign students can begin to learn how things work, how the lectures will be conducted, because it was a little difficult at first, and also, if there could be an office where foreign students could go and discuss their problems. International students have more problems than Greek students. First of all, there is the language, and then there are students who have to work to support themselves. There is also a bit of a problem with student housing because most students cannot afford to live in apartments, they can't get a room in student housing, and that's another problem that students from other countries face."*

*"I would like there to be something that informs us about how to navigate the university, that teaches us how to deal with difficult situations. Even some help for students to get to know each other."*

The analysis of the two research questions shows that support for foreign students at Greek universities is mainly individual and not institutional. Students rely on personal relationships and their own efforts to adapt, while the institution does not seem to have developed adequate guidance and integration structures. In this context, academic success could be enhanced through targeted language support and adaptation of teaching materials, staff training in intercultural issues, the creation of formal information and mentoring mechanisms, and the strengthening of psychological and social support structures. Overall, students expressed a desire for a more inclusive, informed, and sensitive university environment that actively supports the academic and social integration of foreign students.

## 6. Discussion

This research revealed a significant gap between the theoretical framework of internationalization and intercultural education policies in Greece and the actual experiences of foreign students studying at Greek universities. It is one of the few studies that empirically documents the mismatch between policy and practice in the Greek higher education context. The institutional support perceived by foreign students was found to be fragmented and largely informal. This reflects the persistence of a monocultural institutional habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014), where integration is conceived as an individual rather than an institutional responsibility. Similar patterns

were observed by Gropas and Triandafyllidou (2011), who argue that Greek universities continue to operate within an assimilationist framework. The lack of organized mentoring, linguistic assistance, and intercultural awareness confirms Riddell and Weedon's (2014) argument that inclusion policies often fail at the level of implementation because they do not transform the underlying institutional culture.

The findings align with both international and Greek literature, which emphasize that socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural factors play a decisive role in shaping students' academic success and social integration (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014; Bowden & Doughney, 2010; Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011). Although the Greek state has introduced legislative measures to promote equality and access to higher education (Law 4009/2011; Law 4485/2017), institutional support for foreign students remains limited. Participants reported minimal organized assistance and inadequate information about available services. The overall pattern across the six thematic areas demonstrates an institutional habitus that remains predominantly monocultural, placing the responsibility for adaptation on individual students rather than on systemic support structures. The absence of structured support services aligns with Bourdieu's notion of institutional habitus, where universities tend to reproduce dominant cultural expectations rather than adjust to diverse student needs. The fact that participants relied largely on informal networks illustrates how institutional structures implicitly expect students to possess the cultural and linguistic capital necessary to navigate the system independently. Similar patterns have been observed in previous research on Greek higher education (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011), which highlights the persistence of assimilationist logics despite official commitments to inclusion.

Language not only acts as a practical obstacle but also operates as a form of cultural capital that determines access to academic success. In Bourdieu's terms, the linguistic expectations embedded in the academic field privilege students whose habitus aligns with the dominant linguistic norms. The lack of institutional language support reinforces inequalities, as also reported in international studies showing that language proficiency is a critical determinant of foreign students' academic integration (Milesi, 2004). The bureaucratic obstacles described by participants—particularly regarding residence permits—reflect structural barriers external to the classroom but embedded within the institutional habitus. These administrative practices function as institutional "rules of the game" that foreign students must learn to navigate without guidance.

Experiences of loneliness and difficulty forming peer relationships further illustrate the misalignment between students' habitus and the social norms of university life. The absence of mechanisms that foster intercultural interaction reflects a monocultural institutional ethos. According to Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010), when institutional habitus does not actively promote belonging, students who lack dominant social capital experience emotional marginalization.

Although not universal, incidents of discrimination reveal how cultural distance and racialization can shape students' experiences. Such incidents demonstrate the symbolic boundaries that operate within the academic field, shaping who is recognized

as a legitimate member of the university community. The case of the student who experienced far-right harassment exemplifies how broader societal habitus permeates university experiences, confirming earlier findings that Greek universities are not immune to wider social inequalities.

Finally, the most pervasive theme—students attributing their adaptation to personal effort—epitomizes the functioning of institutional habitus. When universities fail to provide structural support, students internalize their struggles as individual shortcomings. This reflects Bourdieu's argument that institutions maintain existing power relations by framing structural barriers as personal challenges. It also mirrors international research showing that foreign students often perceive integration as a personal duty when institutional structures are weak (Marginson, 2018).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that foreign students' experiences in Greek universities are best understood not as isolated difficulties but as manifestations of an institutional habitus that remains insufficiently internationalized and inadequately responsive to diversity.

## 7. Conclusion

This study highlights significant gaps between the rhetoric of internationalization and the practical realities encountered by foreign students in Greek higher education. The findings demonstrate that institutional support remains fragmented, informal, and inconsistently communicated. Language barriers, bureaucratic challenges, social isolation, and occasional discrimination collectively hinder students' academic engagement and sense of belonging. The pervasive belief among students that adaptation is solely their personal responsibility indicates the continued dominance of a monocultural institutional habitus.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature by illustrating how institutional habitus operates in a context where internationalization policies exist in principle but are weakly implemented in practice. The results confirm that without structural changes—such as accessible language support, improved communication of services, intercultural training for staff, and mechanisms that promote social integration—universities risk reproducing inequalities rather than mitigating them. Practically, the findings suggest the need for comprehensive policy reforms, including multilingual information systems, structured orientation programs, mentoring schemes, and improved collaboration between universities and state authorities to reduce bureaucratic burdens. Addressing these issues is essential for creating an inclusive academic environment that supports the full participation and success of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Future research should broaden the scope by examining multiple universities, incorporating mixed-method approaches, and exploring the perspectives of academic staff and administrators to better understand how institutional policies are interpreted and enacted.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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