

Social Support and Academic Adaptation Among Domestic and International Students in Indonesian Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Domestic out-of-town and international students must adapt to a new academic and sociocultural environment while separated from their primary support systems, yet comparative qualitative evidence on their experience of social support remains scarce. This study explored the meaning of social support in the academic adaptation of both groups. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was applied to sixteen purposively selected students at an Indonesian university, twelve domestic and four international students from India, Ecuador, Botswana, and Tanzania, over four months. The process covered reflexivity preparation, informed consent, two to three interview sessions per participant, and member checking. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase inductive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged from 187 codes: emotional (54 codes; 16/16 participants), informational (49; 16/16), instrumental (44; 15/16), and social network support (40; 14/16). Domestic students relied on regional communities and senior peers, whereas international students relied on cross-cultural friendships and institutional support. Universities should provide differentiated, culturally responsive support, especially in the first two semesters. Institutional emotional support also needs strengthening.

Keywords: Social Support, Academic Adaptation, Acculturative Stress, Domestic Students, International Students

INTRODUCTION

The movement of students to pursue higher education outside their place of origin, whether within the same country or across national borders, has become a prominent feature of contemporary higher education. In Indonesia, domestic out-of-town students (*mahasiswa rantau*), namely individuals who leave their home regions to study in other cities or provinces, form a large population. At the same time, Indonesian universities enroll a growing number of international students, including those from the Global South such as India, Ecuador, Botswana, and Tanzania. Research on students with migration backgrounds shows that leaving familiar

surroundings exposes them to stressors that require psychological resources to manage (Liu et al., 2025). Studies of international students likewise show that psychological adaptation is closely tied to the resources students draw on when their established networks are far away (Mahmood et al., 2026). Although the scale of relocation differs, both groups must adjust to a new academic environment and an unfamiliar sociocultural setting at the same time. This shared demand makes a comparative examination of the two groups both timely and theoretically meaningful.

Academic adaptation is widely understood as a multidimensional process involving academic, social,

emotional, and sociocultural adjustment (Juboori et al., 2025). A recent systematic review of international students' academic adjustment grouped its determinants into personal characteristics, sociocultural factors, and situational circumstances. The review also noted that existing theoretical frameworks have produced more controversy than consistency (Mao, 2025). Mixed-methods evidence points the same way, showing that academic adaptation cannot be reduced to a single dimension (Mao, 2024). Adaptation is therefore best understood as a dynamic process shaped by students' personal resources and by the environments in which they study.

Acculturative stress is a central obstacle in this process. It refers to the psychological strain arising from cultural adjustment, including language barriers, social isolation, value conflicts, and homesickness (Berry, 1997). A longitudinal study found that greater perceived cultural distance predicted higher acculturative stress, which in turn increased academic stress. Reductions in acculturative stress corresponded to lower academic stress only among students with strong institutional social support (Abacioglu & Larsen, 2026). Chen (2025) reported that acculturative stress impaired university life adjustment among international students in China. Unmanaged stress of this kind can undermine academic performance, psychological well-being, and persistence in study (Xu & Chai, 2025). International students from culturally distant backgrounds tend to face more pronounced linguistic and cultural differences. Domestic out-of-town students may face subtler forms of cultural displacement within a shared national identity that still contains

diverse local cultures (Kristiana et al., 2022).

The grouping of international students in this study requires a theoretical clarification. The participants come from four markedly different countries, and their grouping does not imply a shared culture, language, or migration history. Consistent with recent methodological perspectives, "international student" is treated here as a shared analytical positionality rather than a fixed demographic label (Spangler, 2023). What unites these students is their structural position as newcomers who crossed a national border and must negotiate an unfamiliar institutional system, new academic norms, and the everyday cultural practices of the host country, usually while separated from their support networks. Prior research supports this strategy. Studies of students from culturally diverse origins report meaningful, though not identical, forms of acculturative strain despite differences in national background (Aljaberi et al., 2021; Gyasi-Gyamrah et al., 2024).

Social support has long been recognized as a protective factor in adjustment to new environments. Cobb (1976) described it as information that leads individuals to feel cared for, valued, and part of a network of mutual obligation. House (1981) and Cutrona and Russell (1990) distinguished its emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal-related forms. They also argued that support is most effective when its type matches the demands of the stressor. Meta-analytic evidence shows that social support is positively associated with the psychological adjustment of international students, and that perceived support matters more than objectively received support (Bender et al., 2019). A more recent meta-analysis

of 13 studies ($N = 6,233$) found a significant positive association between social support and academic adjustment ($r = .365$). It also reported substantial unexplained variation across studies (Sari et al., 2026). Sources of support include family, peers, lecturers, staff, and the institution, each playing a distinct role (Shu et al., 2019).

Two complementary models explain how social support works in student adaptation. The main effect model holds that support directly enhances functioning and adjustment regardless of stress level (Hassan et al., 2023). The stress-buffering model holds that support moderates the harmful impact of stress on well-being and adjustment (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Recent studies illustrate the buffering function. Jarrar and Nweke (2025) found that loneliness mediated the link between acculturative stress and depression among Nigerian students in Northern Cyprus, while social support mitigated these effects. Soufi Amlashi et al. (2025) showed that social support mediated the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being among international students in Germany. Xu and Chai (2025) reported that peer support weakened the negative influence of high academic expectations on cultural adaptation and social integration. Buffering is not uniform, however. Perceived support was a weaker protective factor for Chinese students with both left-behind and migrant experiences, whose sense of hopelessness was higher (Liu et al., 2025).

Beyond stress reduction, social support is also tied to identity, belonging, and resilience. A strong sense of school belonging predicted resilience among international students in China, and

resilience in turn facilitated their college adjustment amid culture shock (Yang & Gao, 2025). Bonding social capital, which is close and trust-based ties within a community, mediated the relationship between social media use and international students' subjective well-being (Duan et al., 2025). Students' ties to their home culture also matter. International students who maintained their culture-of-origin language and knowledge showed stronger adaptation to the host culture (Salerno et al., 2024). Together these studies suggest that the social networks students belong to may serve as anchors of original identity and as bridges to the host environment. This dual function may differ between students moving within one country and those crossing national borders.

Despite this growing literature, the problem remains in the university where this study was conducted. Domestic out-of-town students and international students study side by side, yet they may experience social support in different ways that university programs do not recognize. Domestic students appear to rely on regional communities and senior peers from the same area. International students appear to rely on cross-cultural friendships, the international office, and buddy programs. These differing patterns are rarely documented, so existing support services tend to be uniform and may miss the distinct needs of each group. Students' own accounts of what support means to them, and how it operates alongside acculturative stress, remain largely unexamined at this site. This limits the university's ability to design responsive and culturally inclusive support systems.

Previous studies have examined this topic mostly in other settings and with other designs. Quantitative studies

of social support and acculturative stress among international students (Kristiana et al., 2022) and the meta-analytic work above have established statistical associations. Qualitative work has begun to capture the lived experience of support. Gyasi-Gyamrah et al. (2024) used an interpretative phenomenological approach to show how social support systems shape acculturative stress among international students in Ghana. In Indonesia, studies have relied mainly on quantitative correlational designs. Karo et al. (2024) found that although 72% of nursing students received adequate social support, 61% showed only moderate academic adaptation. This result suggests a more complex relationship than statistical associations alone can explain. Phenomenological research that compares domestic and international students within the same Indonesian institution is virtually absent.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring, through a comparative phenomenological approach, the meaning of social support in the academic adaptation of domestic out-of-town and international students at an Indonesian university. The specific objectives are (1) to identify the forms of social support received and their meaning in academic adaptation; (2) to understand how students perceive and use support from various sources; (3) to explore the relationship between social support, acculturative stress, and academic adaptation; and (4) to formulate a conceptual model of social support grounded in student experience that can inform intervention programs. By centering both groups, this study aims to advance contextually grounded models of academic adaptation. It also aims to give universities practical guidance for

designing more responsive and culturally inclusive support systems.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design. It aimed to describe how domestic out-of-town students and international students experience social support during academic adaptation. Qualitative inquiry suits research centered on context, experience, and human perspective, and phenomenology is one of its major approaches (Lim, 2025). Descriptive phenomenology treats participants' own accounts as the primary data and describes the meanings they attach to their experiences without imposing external theoretical interpretations (Abraham & Padmakumari, 2025). The design fits this study for two reasons. The inquiry is exploratory, since little is known about how social support is experienced by both groups in the same institution. The participants also differ widely in cultural background, so the approach must foreground individual meaning-making rather than predetermined categories.

The participants were sixteen students of Universitas Negeri Surabaya, an Indonesian university, selected through purposive sampling. Twelve were domestic out-of-town students from different Indonesian provinces, and four were international students from India, Ecuador, Botswana, and Tanzania. The study sought participants who had left their place of origin to study and who could describe their adaptation in depth. The international students were grouped by shared analytical positionality, meaning their common position as newcomers in a foreign higher education

system, and not by presumed cultural similarity (Spangler, 2023). Sample size guidance in qualitative research depends on the type of saturation pursued. Theme saturation can be reached with about nine interviews, while meaning saturation generally requires more (Wutich et al.,

2024). Sixteen participants, each interviewed two to three times, therefore gave sufficient depth. Recruitment and interviewing continued until no new codes emerged. Table 1 presents their characteristics.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

No	Code	Gender	Origin	Age	Study Program	Semester	Duration
1	P-01	Female	Makassar (Domestic)	20yo	Psychology	4	2 years
2	P-02	Male	Medan (Domestic)	21yo	Civil Engineering	6	3 years
3	P-03	Female	Kupang (Domestic)	20yo	Medicine	4	2 years
4	P-04	Male	Manado (Domestic)	20yo	Management	2	1 year
5	P-05	Female	Tangerang (Domestic)	21yo	Indonesia Education	6	3 years
6	P-06	Male	Pontianak (Domestic)	20yo	Communication	2	1 year
7	P-07	Female	Ternate (Domestic)	22yo	Education	6	3 years
8	P-08	Male	Jayapura (Domestic)	21yo	Economics	4	2 years
9	P-09	Female	Palembang (Domestic)	20yo	Pharmacy	2	1 year
10	P-10	Male	Mataram (Domestic)	22yo	Informatics	6	3 years
11	P-11	Female	Palu (Domestic)	20yo	Nursing	4	2 years
12	P-12	Male	Ambon (Domestic)	20yo	Physics	4	2 years
13	P-13	Female	India (International)	21yo	Bahasa Indonesia	2	1 year
14	P-14	Female	Ecuador (International)	22yo	Bahasa Indonesia	2	1 year
15	P-15	Female	Botswana (International)	21yo	Bahasa Indonesia	2	1 year
16	P-16	Male	Tanzania (International)	22yo	Bahasa Indonesia	2	1 year

Table 1 shows that the sixteen participants comprised nine women and seven men, aged 20 to 22 years. The twelve domestic students came from twelve different regions, from Makassar and Medan in the west and center to

Jayapura and Ambon in the east. They studied in twelve different programs and were in the second, fourth, or sixth semester, so their length of stay ranged from one to three years. This variation covers early, middle, and later phases of

adaptation, which allows the study to capture how support needs change over time. The four international students came from four countries. All were in the Bahasa Indonesia study program at the second semester, with one year of residence, so they were still in the early adaptation phase when linguistic and cultural demands are most intense. This composition supports a comparison that reflects both variation within each group and the shared condition of being newcomers.

The study took place at [nama universitas], an Indonesian university that enrolls both domestic out-of-town students and international students. This setting allowed the two groups to be studied under the same institutional conditions, including the same academic system and campus services. Data collection lasted four months [bulan–tahun]. This period was long enough to hold repeated sessions with each participant, and participants were reached at different times within it. Because they were at different semesters, from the second to the sixth, their accounts came from different phases of adaptation, not from a single moment.

The research proceeded in several stages. Before fieldwork, the researcher recorded personal assumptions, expectations, and preconceptions about students' experiences of social support and acculturative stress in a reflexivity journal. Participants were then recruited and gave informed consent, with anonymity and the right to withdraw without consequences explained to them. Each participant took part in two to three interview sessions. The first focused on background and initial experiences of relocation, and the second explored specific social support experiences and

their perceived meaning. The third was used for member checking and data clarification. Participant observation and the collection of personal documentation ran alongside the interviews. After the fieldwork, the data were transcribed, coded, and developed into themes. The reflexivity journal was kept throughout, and all data were stored securely in accordance with applicable research ethics standards.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and review of personal documentation provided by participants. The interview guide was built on the social support framework of Cobb (1976), House (1981), and Cutrona and Russell (1990). It covered four dimensions: emotional, instrumental, informational, and social network support. The protocol contained about 12–15 open-ended questions on these dimensions during academic adaptation, as well as on acculturative stress, coping strategies, and the perceived role of support in adjustment. Probing questions were used flexibly to obtain clearer and richer descriptions. Each session lasted about 60 to 90 minutes. Sessions with international students whose primary language was neither Indonesian nor English were held in English. Because meaning can shift across languages, language choice and translation were treated as part of the interpretive context and not as neutral technical steps (Schumann et al., 2025).

Data were analyzed with the six-phase inductive thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke, as applied in recent reflexive thematic analysis work (Pearson et al., 2025). The phases were: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) systematic initial coding of the full dataset; (3)

grouping codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Coding was done manually and supported by NVivo. Trustworthiness was addressed through source and method triangulation for credibility, rich contextual description for transferability, an audit trail for dependability, and researcher reflexivity for confirmability (Lim, 2025). The researcher also applied *epoché* (bracketing) through the reflexivity journal, treating reflexivity as an ongoing, documented practice and not a one-time declaration (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). After each interview, the journal recorded prior assumptions, emotional reactions, emerging interpretations, and how the researcher's wording or probing may have shaped responses. Entries after interviews with the four international participants also noted possible cultural or linguistic assumptions. Bracketing here raises reflexive awareness and does not claim complete neutrality (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Emerging interpretations

were compared with participants' original statements and confirmed in member checking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study involved sixteen participants, consisting of twelve domestic out-of-town students and four international students from India, Ecuador, Botswana, and Tanzania. Thematic analysis of the sixteen in-depth interview transcripts produced four main themes on the meaning of social support in academic adaptation: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and social network support. Each main theme contains three sub-themes. In total, 187 codes were identified across the four themes. The distribution of themes and the number of participants who reported each one are shown in Figure 1 and Table 2. Where relevant, the experiences of domestic and international students are reported separately.



Figure 1. Thematic Map of the Meaning of Social Support in Academic Adaptation among Domestic Out-of-Town and International Students

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Frequency of Occurrence in Data

No.	Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes	Participants (n = 16)
1	Emotional Support as the Psychological Foundation of Adaptation	Sense of security and acceptance; Reduction of loneliness; Strengthening of self-confidence	54	16/16 (100%)
2	Instrumental Support as a Facilitator of Academic Functioning	Financial assistance; Collaborative learning facilities; Access to academic resources	44	15/16 (94%)
3	Informational Support as Navigation in a New Environment	Academic procedure information; Cultural adaptation guidance; Problem-solving advice	49	16/16 (100%)
4	Social Network Support as Identity Reinforcement	Sense of belonging; Sociocultural integration; Formation of migrant identity	40	14/16 (88%)

Theme 1: Emotional Support as the Psychological Foundation of Adaptation

All sixteen participants, both domestic and international, described emotional support as the most essential dimension of the support they received during academic adaptation. The theme was coded 54 times, the highest of the four. Participants described it as a sense of being understood, accepted, and not facing challenges alone while studying away from home. They reported that this support enabled them to carry out their academic responsibilities. Its three sub-themes were a sense of security and acceptance, reduction of loneliness, and strengthening of self-confidence. Domestic and international participants named different providers of this support, as the accounts in the next paragraph show.

Participant P-03 (domestic, Kupang) expressed: "What helped me most to survive here was when my dormitory friends were willing to listen

when I felt I had failed my first exam. They did not judge me; they just listened. That made me feel I could still go on." P-07 (domestic, Ternate) reported that regular video calls with her family at home provided the "emotional energy" she needed to face demanding academic weeks. P-13 (India) stated: "The first months were very hard. I did not understand the food, the language, the customs. What kept me going was a small group of seniors from my country who kept checking on me. That feeling of being seen it is everything." P-16 (Tanzania) said: "I cried many times alone in my room. But my Indonesian buddies began to invite me for meals and ask about my country. It sounds small, but it changed everything."

Theme 2: Instrumental Support as a Facilitator of Academic Functioning

Fifteen of the sixteen participants identified instrumental support as concretely facilitating their academic functioning. This theme was coded 44 times. It covered material assistance such

as emergency loans and shared study facilities, and the sharing of academic resources including books, lecture notes, and internet access. Its sub-themes were financial assistance, collaborative learning facilities, and access to academic resources. Participants described this help as a tangible expression of care and solidarity from their social environment. Among international students, instrumental support also included help with institutional and logistical systems that were new to them.

Participant P-02 (domestic, Medan) described: "When my laptop broke just before a major assignment deadline, a classmate I barely knew immediately offered his. It was not about the laptop; it was about how people here were willing to care." P-14 (Ecuador) recounted: "I did not know how the scholarship reimbursement system worked. A friend from my department walked me through the entire process, helped me translate documents, and accompanied me to the administrative office. Without that, I would have lost my stipend." P-15 (Botswana) highlighted the international student office: "The university provided housing assistance in the first semester. That was foundational, once my basic needs were met, I could focus on studying."

Theme 3: Informational Support as Navigation in a New Environment

All sixteen participants said that timely and accurate information was a valuable resource for navigating the new campus and city. This theme was coded 49 times. Participants described informational support as obtaining knowledge, guidance, and advice about academic procedures, local sociocultural norms, and ways to solve problems. Its

sub-themes were academic procedure information, cultural adaptation guidance, and problem-solving advice. Among domestic students, senior peers from the same region of origin (*kakak tingkat rantau*) were consistently named as the main source of information, especially in the initial adaptation period. International students named peers and institutional staff as equally important sources. The content they received also covered cultural interpretation, language navigation, and guidance on cross-cultural misunderstandings.

P-05 (domestic, Tangerang) explained: "The seniors from Tangerang who were already here knew exactly what I would struggle with. They told me which professors were strict about attendance, which neighborhoods were safe, and how to handle homesickness. That information was priceless." P-13 (India) described relying on the university's international student buddy program: "My buddy explained the Indonesian grading system, told me how to address lecturers respectfully, and warned me about cultural taboos I might unknowingly violate. Without that, I would have made many embarrassing mistakes." P-16 (Tanzania) described the role of multilingual peers: "English is my language, but lectures were in Indonesian. Sometimes, my friends would summarize key points in English after class. That was my lifeline in the first semester."

Theme 4: Social Network Support as Identity Reinforcement

Fourteen of the sixteen participants reported that membership in meaningful social networks influenced the formation and maintenance of their identity as students studying away from home. The theme was coded 40 times,

and its sub-themes were sense of belonging, sociocultural integration, and formation of migrant identity. Participants described belonging and acceptance within a regional peer association (*paguyuban*), a dormitory community, an academic program cohort, or an international student organization. A difference between the two groups was observed. Domestic students emphasized regional identity communities as a way to maintain cultural continuity. International students more often mentioned cross-cultural friendships and institutional international communities as a way to build a new, hybrid identity.

Participant P-05 (domestic, Tangerang) reflected: "Joining the Jabodetabek student association here meant I did not lose my identity, but at the same time it helped me to open up to Javanese culture. That balance was what I needed." P-14 (Ecuador) stated: "I found a small international student group, from various countries, and within it I felt free to be myself without constantly explaining my background. We were all foreigners together. That solidarity was powerful." P-15 (Botswana) added: "My closest friends here are Indonesian, and through them I learned the language faster and understood the culture better. The social network was my fastest route to adaptation."

Table 3. Matrix of Social Support Sources by Support Dimension

Source	Emotional	Instrumental	Informational	Network
Family (parents, siblings)	Highly Dominant	Dominant	Moderate	Low
Peers (same cohort)	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant
Senior peers (same origin)	Moderate	Moderate	Highly Dominant	Dominant
Lecturers/academic staff	Moderate	Low	Highly Dominant	Moderate
University institution	Low	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant
Regional/cultural community (<i>paguyuban</i>)	Dominant	Moderate	Moderate	Highly Dominant
International student office/buddy	Moderate	Dominant	Highly Dominant	Moderate
Cross-cultural peer networks	Dominant	Moderate	Dominant	Highly Dominant

Table 3 shows how participants rated each source of support across the four dimensions. Peers of the same cohort were the only source rated Dominant in all four. Family was rated Highly Dominant for emotional support, and the university institution was rated Low for it. Senior peers of the same origin, lecturers and academic staff, and the international student office or buddy

program were each rated Highly Dominant for informational support. The regional or cultural community (*paguyuban*) and cross-cultural peer networks were rated Highly Dominant for network support. Participants' accounts also showed a change in needs over time in both groups. In the early phase, the first and second semesters, informational and emotional support

from co-regional or co-national peers and family was most needed. In the middle phase, instrumental support and social network participation from peers and the institution became more prominent as academic demands increased. In the later phase, academic support from lecturers and the role of supporting newer students became more prominent. For international students, this sequence was more compressed and intense, especially in the first semester.

Discussion

The four themes identified in this study (emotional, instrumental, informational, and social network support) correspond to the typology of social support proposed by House (1981) and Cutrona and Russell (1990). The 187 codes were spread fairly evenly across them. Emotional support accounted for 54 codes (28.9%), informational support 49 (26.2%), instrumental support 44 (23.5%), and social network support 40 (21.4%). The gap between the most and least frequent theme is only 14 codes, which shows that support is multidimensional and that no single form dominated the accounts. Both domestic and international participants described emotional, practical, informational, and relational help as parts of one experience, and this matches the way the typology treats support as a set of related functions and not as separate forms.

The number of participants per theme shows how widely each form was reported. Emotional and informational support were reported by all sixteen participants (100%), instrumental support by fifteen (94%), and social network support by fourteen (88%). These figures describe how often themes appeared in the accounts and not how strongly each affected adaptation, so they

should not be read as a hierarchy of effects. A qualitative design cannot support claims about effect size, and the ranking of themes here is descriptive only. A theme reported by fewer participants may still be decisive for those who reported it, and the counts say nothing about that.

Quantitative work reports varying effect sizes, which qualitative findings can help explain. Bender et al. (2019) found a moderate association between social support and the psychological adjustment of international students ($r \approx 0.20$), with perceived support mattering more than objective support. A meta-analysis of 13 studies ($N = 6,233$) found $r = .365$ for academic adjustment, with substantial unexplained variation (Sari et al., 2026). Participants here described what each form of support meant to their ability to function, which suggests one source of that variation. This also fits the finding of Karo et al. (2024) that 72% of Indonesian nursing students reported adequate support while 61% showed only moderate academic adaptation. Adequate support alone therefore does not explain adaptation, and the meaning students give to it needs to be examined.

Theme 1: Emotional Support as the Psychological Foundation of Adaptation

Emotional support was the most frequently coded theme, with 54 codes, and all sixteen participants (100%) reported it. Participants described a common sequence: isolation in the early months, then relief once a listener or a group of compatriots was available. One domestic participant described friends who listened without judging after a failed exam, and an international participant described crying alone before

Indonesian friends began to invite her for meals. This is consistent with Cobb's (1976) view of support as information that leads a person to feel cared for. It also suggests that feeling cared for made other kinds of support usable. Domestic students named dormitory friends and family, while international students named seniors from their own country and Indonesian friends.

The finding agrees with recent studies. Chen (2025) studied 642 international students in China and found that perceived social support buffered the effects of acculturative stress, especially in emotional domains. Jarrar and Nweke (2025) found that social support weakened the pathway from acculturative stress through loneliness to depression among Nigerian students in Northern Cyprus. Soufi Amlashi et al. (2025) found that social support mediated the link between acculturative stress and psychological well-being among international students in Germany. These studies measured stress and well-being with scales. The present accounts add the meanings students attached to this support, especially the value of being acknowledged across cultural difference, which scales rarely capture.

Table 3 adds a point that these studies do not address. Family was rated Highly Dominant for emotional support, while the university institution was rated Low. Abacioglu and Larsen (2026) found that reductions in acculturative stress corresponded to lower academic stress only among students with strong institutional support. The low emotional rating of the institution here is therefore a weakness worth examining critically. Emotional support at this site appears to depend heavily on informal ties, such as family, friends, and compatriots.

Students who lack such ties may have no other source, and this makes institutional emotional support an area for improvement.

Theme 2: Instrumental Support as a Facilitator of Academic Functioning

Instrumental support was reported by fifteen of the sixteen participants (94%) and coded 44 times. Participants described emergency loans, shared study facilities, and the sharing of books, lecture notes, and internet access. One participant recalled a classmate she barely knew lending a laptop before a deadline, and she said the gesture mattered more than the device. Participants therefore saw this help as more than practical, describing it as an expression of care from their environment. This links academic adaptation to the material context around students. Juboori et al. (2025) reported a strong relationship between social support and academic adaptation ($r = 0.62$) among international students in the rural southern United States, which is a larger association than those in the meta-analyses cited earlier.

Domestic and international students needed different kinds of instrumental help. Domestic students mostly needed shared resources and help in financial emergencies. International students needed help with scholarship reimbursement, document translation, and housing, and they turned to friends and the international student office. One international participant said that without a friend's help with the reimbursement process she would have lost her stipend. Table 3 reflects this split by source. The international student office was rated Dominant for instrumental support, and lecturers and staff were rated Low. Instrumental support for international

students therefore appears to depend on dedicated institutional channels and not on academic staff, who were not seen as a source of practical help.

The findings support the argument that institutions have a role in providing practical support. Martirosyan et al. (2019) argued that structured academic and social support services improve the retention and engagement of international students. San and Guo (2023) found that institutional and social support jointly predict academic performance through academic adaptation. The accounts here are consistent with both, since one participant described early housing assistance as the basis for concentrating on study. The evidence rests on self-reports, however, so it shows perceived value and not measured academic outcomes. It also comes from students who received help, and the study did not examine students who needed help and did not receive it.

Theme 3: Informational Support as Navigation in a New Environment

Informational support was reported by all sixteen participants (100%) and coded 49 times, the second highest count after emotional support. Participants described it as knowledge, guidance, and advice about academic procedures, local norms, and problem solving. Among domestic students, senior peers from the same region (*kakak tingkat rantau*) were the main source, especially in the initial period, because they knew which lecturers were strict, which neighborhoods were safe, and how to handle homesickness. International students named peers and institutional staff, and the information they received also covered cultural interpretation, language navigation, and guidance on

cross-cultural misunderstandings. Informational support therefore worked as a form of cultural mediation and was not limited to academic content.

Table 3 shows the same pattern by source. Senior peers of the same origin, lecturers and academic staff, and the international student office or buddy program were each rated Highly Dominant for informational support. The university institution was rated Dominant. Four different sources were therefore rated at the top two levels for the same dimension, which suggests that students collect information from several channels at once and do not rely on a single one. This differs from instrumental support, where lecturers were rated Low. Lecturers appear to serve mainly as a source of knowledge and not of material help. Joseph and Sudhesh (2023) found that institutional information reduced academic stress among international students in India, which is consistent with the role of the international office and buddy program reported here.

The optimal matching perspective of Cutrona and Russell (1990) explains why content mattered. Support protects best when it corresponds to the demands of the stressor. International participants faced academic, linguistic, and cultural unfamiliarity at the same time, so information that combined procedural and cultural content appears to have mattered more than procedural information alone. One international participant described multilingual peers summarizing lectures in English after class as a lifeline in the first semester. Mao (2024) similarly found that culturally attuned support shaped the academic adaptation of international students in China. This reading is interpretive, because the study did not

measure the fit between need and support directly, and it should be tested in later research.

Theme 4: Social Network Support as Identity Reinforcement

Social network support had the lowest frequency, 40 codes (21.4%), and fourteen of the sixteen participants (88%) reported it. The data do not show why two participants did not. Domestic students emphasized regional communities (*paguyuban*) as a way to keep cultural continuity, while international students emphasized cross-cultural friendships and international student groups as a way to build a hybrid identity. One domestic participant said that joining a regional student association let her keep her identity while opening up to Javanese culture. In Table 3, the regional community and cross-cultural peer networks were the only sources rated Highly Dominant for network support, and family was rated Low. Family appears to matter for emotional needs but not for belonging on campus.

The pattern agrees with studies of student networks. Shu et al. (2019) found that cultural diversity within networks and host nationals in emotional support networks predicted better adjustment among international students. Xu and Chai (2025) found that peer support weakened the negative effect of high academic expectations on cultural adaptation and social integration. Yang and Gao (2025) found that a sense of school belonging predicted resilience among international students in China, and that resilience in turn facilitated college adjustment. These findings match the two-way role described by participants, in which networks both kept their original identity and connected them to a new one. The belonging that

participants described may also be one route to the resilience reported by Yang and Gao.

The balance between the two roles may depend on how distant students perceive the host culture to be. Malay et al. (2023) found that perceived cultural distance shapes the adjustment of international students, moderated by cultural intelligence. This may explain why international participants more often turned to cross-cultural and international groups, where they felt free to be themselves without explaining their background. The data here cannot test this explanation, since cultural distance was not measured. The lower frequency of this theme also suggests that network support may be less immediate than emotional and informational support. It may become more visible as students spend more time on campus, and a longitudinal design would be needed to examine this.

Comparative Interpretation: Domestic Out-of-Town and International Students

Comparing the two groups requires care, because they are unequal and differ in more than nationality. Twelve participants (75%) were domestic and four (25%) international. All four international students were in the second semester with one year of residence, while domestic students ranged from one to three years (Table 1). Differences between groups may therefore reflect the phase of adaptation and not only cultural distance. Three domestic participants (P-04, P-06, and P-09) were also in the second semester, so a same-phase comparison is possible in later analysis. This limit should be kept in mind when reading the differences

reported below, since they cannot be attributed to nationality alone.

The differences that appeared concern the form of support more than its type. Domestic students met their instrumental and informational needs largely through informal regional networks in a shared language. International students' equivalent needs extended into scholarship administration, document translation, and lectures delivered in Indonesian, and were more often met through the international student office and buddy programs. Naibaho and Murniati (2022) found that support from family, local friends, and the university predicted adaptation among dormitory students in Jakarta, while support from fellow migrant peers did not. Domestic participants here named co-regional seniors as valuable, which differs from that finding. The difference may come from the samples or from how support was measured, and the present data cannot resolve it.

These results help fill a gap in earlier work. Kristiana et al. (2022) established associations between social support and acculturative stress among international students, but a quantitative design cannot show how each group experiences support. Gyasi-Gyamrah et al. (2024) used an interpretative phenomenological approach in Ghana to show how support systems shape acculturative stress. Liu et al. (2025) found that perceived social support was a weaker buffer for Chinese students with both left-behind and migrant experiences. This study extends such work by comparing domestic and international students within one Indonesian institution. Berry's (1997) framework helps explain why both groups still described the same task of learning to read a new social

environment, even though the cultural gap they crossed differed in size.

Theoretical Integration: Main-Effect and Stress-Buffering Models

The findings can be read through two complementary models. The main-effect model holds that support benefits adjustment regardless of stress level, and the stress-buffering model holds that support is most protective under high stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Instrumental and informational support, reported by 94% and 100% of participants, behaved more like a steady main effect, giving generalized benefit to academic functioning through resources and knowledge. Emotional support, especially among international participants recounting early isolation, behaved more like a buffer, becoming most important at the points of greatest strain. The two models therefore appear to operate together in these accounts and not to compete.

This reading is interpretive and should be treated with caution. The design has no measures of stress and cannot test moderation, so the models are used here only to organize the accounts. Support needs also changed over time. Informational and emotional support mattered most in the first and second semesters. Instrumental support and network participation became more prominent in the middle phase, as academic demands increased, and lecturers and the role of supporting newer students in the later phase. For international students this sequence was more compressed and intense, especially in the first semester, when linguistic and cultural barriers affected every domain of adaptation at the same time.

Earlier research points to similar conditions. Lee et al. (2020) found that

social support moderated the effect of stress on college adjustment among international students, and Hassan et al. (2023) found that perceived social support and psychological capital worked together to improve academic success. Taken together with the 72% and 61% figures reported by Karo et al. (2024), these findings suggest that adequate support does not guarantee adaptation. Fit, timing, and the meaning students give to support also matter. This supports early and targeted support in the first two semesters, when needs were highest, and it suggests that support programs should be designed with these phases in mind.

Conceptual Contribution: The Contextual Social Support Model for Migrating Students (CSSMMS)

Building on these findings, this study proposes the Contextual Social Support Model for Migrating Students (CSSMMS). It depicts how support sources, support dimensions, the meaning constructed by students, psychological mechanisms, and academic adaptation relate to one another. The model places the meaning constructed by students at the center, between the support they receive and its psychological effects. This follows the finding of Bender et al. (2019) that perceived support is more determinative than objective support, and it reflects the way participants described support in terms of what it meant to them and not only of what they received. The model is shown in Figure 2.

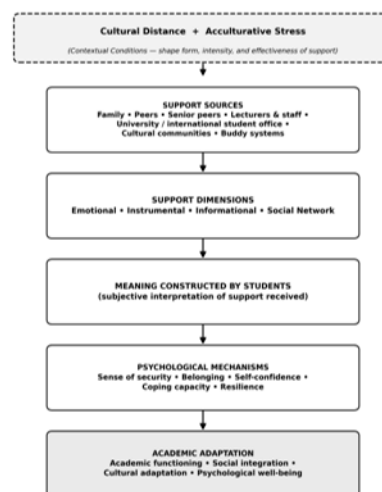


Figure 2. The Contextual Social Support Model for Migrating Students (CSSMMS)

Figure 2 begins with cultural distance and acculturative stress, which are placed above the sequence as contextual conditions that shape the form, intensity, and effectiveness of support. Below them, the model runs from support sources (family, peers, senior peers, lecturers and staff, the university or international student office, cultural communities, and buddy

systems) to the four support dimensions. These lead to the meaning constructed by students, then to psychological mechanisms (sense of security, belonging, self-confidence, coping capacity, and resilience), and finally to academic adaptation. Academic adaptation covers academic functioning, social integration, cultural adaptation, and psychological well-being. The

arrows show a conceptual sequence and not a causal one, as stated in the note to the figure.

The contextual placement reflects the finding that domestic and international participants followed a broadly similar pathway but differed in how much support they needed and in what form. Abacioglu and Larsen (2026) found that cultural distance predicted acculturative stress, and Malay et al. (2023) found that perceived cultural distance shapes adjustment. The model builds on both by treating them as conditions and not as steps. It remains a conceptual interpretation grounded in sixteen accounts and existing theory, not an empirically validated model. Future quantitative or mixed-methods research with larger and more balanced samples is needed to test the relationships it proposes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the meaning of social support in the academic adaptation of twelve domestic out-of-town students and four international students at an Indonesian university. Four themes emerged from 187 codes: emotional support (54 codes; 16/16 participants), informational support (49; 16/16), instrumental support (44; 15/16), and social network support (40; 14/16). Domestic students relied mainly on regional communities and co-regional senior peers, while international students relied more on cross-cultural friendships and institutional support. Universities are therefore advised to provide differentiated and culturally responsive support, with peer mentoring for domestic students and buddy programs, administrative and language assistance for international students, especially in

the first two semesters. Institutional emotional support, which participants rated Low, also needs strengthening. The small and unequal sample (12 domestic and 4 international students, all international students in their second semester) limits generalization. Future studies should use larger, balanced samples and test the CSSMMS quantitatively.

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