Welcome services of Tomas Bata University in Zlín

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ASSIGNMENT OF DIPLOMA THESIS
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Theses guidelines

1. Conduct a bibliographic research on the marketing of welcome services in tertiary educational systems, cross-culture communication differences and specifics of communication differences between European countries and countries of global south. On the basis of the theoretical definition of the studied problem, formulate the research questions and objectives of the thesis.

2. Analyse the current state of Welcome services provided by Tomas Bata University in Zlín. Define the individual target groups of the welcome services and find out their information needs by means of a marketing survey. Confront the universities communication activities aimed at individual target groups and the level of awareness of the institution and its product among these target groups. Formulate the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of welcome services of the set university. Answer the research questions based on the research findings and analysis.

3. Based on the results of the analysis, develop a proposal for an upgrade of welcome service provided by the Tomas Bata University in Zlín. Evaluate the expected effectiveness of the communication according to your proposal to individual target groups and the question of its financeability and staffing. Indicate the possibilities of implementation in practice or define possible future work on this topic.

Form processing of diploma thesis: **printed/electronic**
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Recommended resources:

Creswell, John. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* (4th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 273 p.
Gheeravo, R., Eikhaug, O., Plumbe, C., Berg, M., & Kunur, M. (2010). Innovating with People – The Business of Inclusive Design. Design and Architecture Norway, ISBN 978-82-452-0500-8.
Trompenaars, Alfonsus, & Hampden-Turner, Charles. (1998). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Global Business* (4th Ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
Wrench, J. S., Tomas-Maddox, C., Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (2013). *Quantitative Research Methods for Communication: A Hands-On Approach* (2nd Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, xii, 595 p. ISBN 978-0-19-993180-4.

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In Zlín   April 3, 2023

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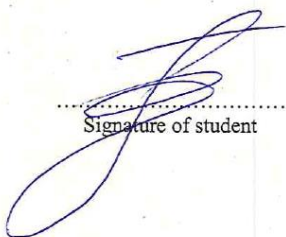
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ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat výzvy a problémy, kterým čelí zahraniční studenti Univerzity Tomáše Bati (UTB) ve Zlíně ve vztahu k pro ně orientovaným službám poskytovaným univerzitou. Pro řešení byl použit výzkumný přístup kombinující různé výzkumné metody. Data byla shromážděna prostřednictvím 16 kvalitativních polo-strukturovaných rozhovorů se zahraničními studenty a následných online dotazníků, v preferovaném jazyce respondenta, tak aby byla zajištěna saturace a relevance zjištěných dat. K identifikaci nejčastějších problémů a výzev, kterým studenti čelí, byla použita tematická analýza. Na základě výsledků byla vypracována doporučení založená na důkazech pro zlepšení uvítacích služeb na TBU. Návrhy zahrnují vylepšení služeb jazykové podpory, inovace v poskytování informací, poskytování podpory pro akademické přizpůsobení, podporu sociální integrace a poskytování mezikulturního vzdělávání a podpory. Expertní validací byla získána zpětná vazba od zahraničních studentů a pracovníků univerzity v oblasti mezinárodních záležitostí předběžně potvrzující dopad navrhovaných zlepšení. Budoucí práce v této oblasti by mohla zahrnovat zpětné vyhodnocení účinnosti navrhovaných změn a identifikaci dalších oblastí pro zlepšení.

Klíčová slova: zahraniční studenti, uvítací služby, vysokoškolské vzdělávání, mezikulturní komunikace, kvalitativní výzkum, tematická analýza.

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to investigate the challenges and problems faced by international students at Tomas Bata University (TBU) in Zlín in relation to the Welcome services provided by the university. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining various research methods. Data was collected through 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews with international students and subsequent online questionnaires, in language preferred by respondent, to ensure saturation and relevance of the found data. Thematic analysis was used to identify the most prevalent issues and challenges faced by the students. Based on the results, evidence-based recommendations for improving the Welcome services at TBU were developed. The proposed upgrades include improving language support services, enhancing information provision, providing support for academic adjustment, promoting social integration, and providing cultural training and support. The expected effectiveness, feasibility, and costs of the proposed changes were evaluated. Expert validation was obtained through pre-implementation feedback from international students and feedback from university staff in the area of international affairs. Future work in this area could include evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed changes and identifying further areas for improvement.

Keywords: international students, welcome services, higher education, cross-cultural communication, qualitative research, thematic analysis.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Universities increasingly attract international students from diverse cultural backgrounds in today's globalized world. Providing effective Welcome services for these students is crucial in helping them transition to a new academic and social environment, enhancing their overall experience and performance (SCHWEISFURTH & GU, 2009), (GÓMEZ, URZÚA, & GLASS, 2014).

Tomas Bata University in Zlín (TBU) is a progressive institution that prides itself on offering a supportive environment for its more and more diverse student population. The university currently provides a range of Welcome services to assist international students in transitioning to life at TBU. Despite TBU's efforts, there was so far only limited research done on the challenges of its services for international students. This study aims to analyse the current state of Welcome services at TBU and identify the main areas for improvement based on its international students' needs and challenges. The research objectives include exploring and evaluating the experiences of international students with Welcome services, identifying gaps in the support provided, and suggesting recommendations for enhancing these services.

The diploma thesis used a mixed-methods approach, utilizing various methods of data gathering through interviews, surveys, and a literature review. The thesis is divided into three main parts: theory, analysis, and project. The theory part is a literature review that covers Welcome services in tertiary educational facilities, cross-cultural differences in communication and understanding, and the research methodology. The analysis part presents the main problems and challenges identified by TBU international students in qualitative research, as well as discusses the current state of the Welcome services provided by Tomas Bata University in Zlín and defines relevant terms. The project part is dedicated to proposing evidence-based recommendations and suggestions for improvements to support the positive experience of international students with the TBU. The effect of these suggestions is measurable and in line with the image and TBU's Welcome services philosophy.

I. THEORY

1 EFFECTIVE WELCOME SERVICES

Effective Welcome services are crucial for supporting international students and researchers in their academic and social integration. Research has shown that quality welcome services significantly impact international students' academic and social satisfaction levels and increase their likelihood of completing their studies and staying at the institution (WARD & KENNEDY, 1994). The Welcome services significantly influence the perceived quality of education, which can impact the decision of international students to enrol in a particular institution (MOSLEHPOUR, CHAU, ZHENG, HANJANI, & HOANG, 2020). The development of services should be based on best practices and involve cooperation and collaboration with international students and graduates. Cross-cultural communication is a critical aspect of effective welcome services, and strategies for effective communication should be based on an understanding of cultural differences in communication.

1.1 Marketing of welcome services in international tertiary education

In recent years, international education has grown into a substantial industry, with universities worldwide trying to recruit an increasing number of overseas students. The number of international students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide has more than doubled since 2000, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2019). This has created a one-of-a-kind marketing challenge for universities, as they must distinguish themselves from other institutions to recruit and retain international students. The quality of welcome services for international students is a significant component of this distinction.

1.1.1 Definition and scope of Welcome services

Welcome services, like orientation programs, cultural events, and support networks, ensure international students have a great experience. Specifically, Welcome services are an essential aspect of international tertiary education, as they support and assist students and researchers studying or conducting research abroad (GOVENDER, VEERASAMY, & NOEL, 2012). These services aim to facilitate the transition and integration of international students and researchers into a new academic and social environment, providing them with the necessary information and resources to adapt and thrive in their new surroundings. Welcome services can include various activities and initiatives, such as pre-arrival information and guidance, airport pick-up, orientation sessions, language classes, housing

assistance, cultural activities, and academic and career support. The scope of Welcome services can vary depending on the institution and the specific needs of international students and researchers.

The significance of Welcome services in international tertiary education has been widely recognized in the literature. Studies have shown that the quality of welcome services can significantly impact the academic and social integration of international students and researchers and their overall satisfaction and well-being. Research has demonstrated that the quality of Welcome services can significantly influence international students' and researchers' academic and social integration in their host country. The authors found that students who received good quality welcome services reported higher academic and social satisfaction levels and were likelier to stay and complete their studies (WARD & KENNEDY, 1994). Specifically, they examined the experiences of international students studying in the United Kingdom and highlighted the importance of Welcome services in supporting their academic and social integration. The study found that students who received high-quality Welcome services reported higher levels of educational and social satisfaction and greater engagement with their studies and the local community. In contrast, students receiving poor or inadequate Welcome services reported higher stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction and were likelier to drop out of their studies. This study is consistent with other research showing the importance of Welcome services in supporting the academic and social integration of international students and researchers (DE WIT, 2002), (YILMAZ & TEMIZKAN, 2022), and (KRISTIANA, et al., 2022). These studies emphasized the importance of Welcome services, stating that they can facilitate the transition of international students and researchers and help them feel more comfortable and at ease in their new environment. The authors found that Welcome services played a critical role in helping international students to overcome culture shock, develop cross-cultural communication skills, and engage in academic and social activities. They argued that Welcome services could provide international students and researchers with opportunities to learn about the local culture and customs and to develop meaningful relationships with local people. This can enhance their overall experience and promote intercultural exchange and cooperation. Furthermore, a study found that Welcome services can significantly influence the perceived quality of education, which can, in turn, impact international students' decision to enrol in a particular institution (MOSLEHPOUR, CHAU, ZHENG, HANJANI, & HOANG, 2020).

This highlights the importance of marketing Welcome services as part of the overall marketing strategy of institutions to attract and retain international students.

Overall, Welcome services can significantly impact the academic and social integration, satisfaction, and well-being of international students and researchers in tertiary education. As such, universities need to focus on developing and promoting high-quality welcome services tailored to the needs and experiences of international students and researchers.

1.1.2 Importance of marketing Welcome services to prospective international students

Marketing international education in relation to Welcome services requires universities to develop effective strategies to attract and retain international students. Universities should develop a comprehensive and tailored welcome service program that meets the unique needs of international students. This could include orientation programs that cover visa requirements, academic expectations, cultural differences, and social and cultural events that facilitate integration into campus life (NICOLESCU, 2013). Universities should also consider using technology to enhance their welcome services, such as online resources, social media, and mobile apps that provide information and support to international students.

By creating a welcoming and supportive environment, universities can improve the overall experience of international students and enhance their reputation, leading to increased enrolment and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (PEREDA, AIREY, & BENNETT, 2007). According to research, international students who receive good welcome services are more likely to be satisfied with their knowledge, do better academically, and recommend their university to others (OYENIYI, SMITH, WATSON, & NELSON, 2021), (SCHWEISFURTH & GU, 2009). Furthermore, Welcome services can assist institutions in developing a solid brand image and reputation, leading to higher enrolment of international students (ZHU & SHARP, 2022).

However, one of the most significant marketing problems universities confront when providing Welcome services to international students is the necessity to distinguish themselves from other institutions. As international education becomes more competitive, colleges must discover ways to differentiate themselves and attract international students. Providing high-quality welcome services that cater to the specific demands of international students can effectively separate an institution from its competitors (HEGARTY, 2014), (HÉNARD, DIAMOND, & ROSEVEARE, 2012). Universities, for example, can

demonstrate their dedication to international students and their success by offering extensive orientation programs that address visa requirements, academic expectations, and cultural differences. Another marketing problem is appropriately communicating the value of welcome services to overseas students. International students may be unfamiliar with welcoming services or unaware of the benefits of engaging in these programs (FARNSWORTH, 2018), (ZHU & SHARP, 2022). As a result, universities must devise effective marketing tactics to advertise their welcome services to international students. This may entail developing customized marketing materials, such as brochures or movies, emphasizing the advantages of engaging in orientation programs or cultural activities. Specifically, universities must understand international students' unique needs and preferences from diverse cultural backgrounds to provide relevant and effective services. Cross-cultural communication is critical for creating a welcoming environment for international students, as it helps to bridge cultural differences and promote understanding (NEWSOME & COOPER, 2016). Moreover, high-quality services are crucial for international students to have a great experience and be satisfied with their educational experience. By prioritizing service quality, institutions may stand out from the competition and draw in more international students (PEREDA, AIREY, & BENNETT, 2007),

In addition to developing a comprehensive program as a product, universities must also effectively promote and communicate their welcome services to international students as their primary target group by developing targeted marketing materials. Such materials can include brochures, videos, or social media campaigns that emphasize the value of welcome services in helping international students succeed academically and socially. Specifically, universities should ensure that their communication strategies with international students are clear, accessible, and culturally sensitive. This includes providing their information and services in multiple languages and through various channels such as email, social media, webinars, and personal contact (HEMSLEY-BROWN & OPLATKA, 2006).

1.2 The significance of International students´ Welcome services

International students' success in higher education partially depends on the quality of welcome services provided to them. Welcome services play an important role in ensuring international students' academic and social integration and, thus, their overall satisfaction and well-being. This section presents the significance of welcome services for international students on academic and social integration.

1.2.1 Impact of effective Welcome services on academic and social integration

Providing practical support and facilitating educational and social integration are essential components of effective Welcome services, which can help international students to feel more comfortable, confident, and integrated into their new environment (MOSLEHPOUR, CHAU, ZHENG, HANJANI, & HOANG, 2020), (JIANG, YUEN, & HORTA, 2020). International students face numerous challenges when studying abroad, including adjusting to a new culture, academic expectations, and the practicalities of life in a foreign country (ALTBACH & KNIGHT, 2007). Therefore, effective Welcome services can assist international students in overcoming these hurdles.

Welcome services play a crucial role in facilitating social integration for international students. Studies have found that social support is critical in determining international students' satisfaction and well-being. Students who received good quality welcome services reported higher academic and social satisfaction levels and were likelier to stay and complete their studies. Similarly, high-quality welcome services are crucial for keeping international students, especially in light of the expensive nature of recruiting them. The study also found that satisfied international students are more likely to recommend their institution to others. Research also shows that social support networks provided through welcome services can help international students cope with the challenges of studying abroad and contribute to their overall well-being (SCHWEISFURTH & GU, 2009).

Welcome services have major impact also in supporting academics for international students, which can enhance international students' academic performance and promote a positive learning experience. Studies have found that academic support can positively impact academic success, satisfaction, and overall well-being (BABY, FATIMA, & KANEEZ, 2022), (LI, HAN, WANG, SUN, & CHENG, 2018). Language support services, such as language courses or exchange programs, help international students improve their language skills and facilitate communication with professors and peers (WILCZEWSKI & ALON, 2022). In addition, the Welcome services can offer academic advising and counselling to help international students navigate the educational system and choose courses that align with their interests and career goals. This can be especially helpful for international students unfamiliar with the host country's education system and academic expectations. Furthermore, the Welcome services can provide support through educational resources, such as access to libraries, research materials, and study spaces. These resources can help international students to achieve academic success by providing them with the necessary

tools to complete assignments and prepare for exams. International students can connect with other students, faculty, and staff and become more involved in campus activities and events. This, in turn, can enhance their sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness (MONTGOMERY & MCDOWELL, 2008).

In summary, effective welcome services are crucial in ensuring international students' academic and social integration, overall satisfaction, and retention rates.

1.2.2 Role of Welcome services in enhancing the overall student experience

Welcome services for international students have become integral to higher education institutions worldwide. These services help international students to integrate into the academic and social culture of the host country and the institution they attend. Providing high-quality welcome services has enhanced student experience, increasing satisfaction, retention, and academic success. This section discusses the role of welcome services in improving the overall student experience.

The first critical role of Welcome services is to provide orientation programs for international students. Orientation programs help new students to become familiar with the campus, academic programs, support services, and cultural norms (POIRIER, SANTANELLO, & GUPCHUP, 2007). For example in the Czech Republic, several universities and institutions provide complex orientation programs to international students to help them navigate the academic and social environment, such as Brno University of Technology offers a "Welcome Week" program managed by its International relations office together with their international students club ESN VUT Brno that includes a week-long program starting with introduction of university tour, information sessions on educational programs and support services, with presentations about possible Sports Activities, information sources at TBU libraries, campus tour and social events, excursions and intensive Czech language course to help international students connect and the local culture. (ESN VUT Brno, 2022) Similarly, Masaryk University in Brno provides complex "Introduction Week" that includes practical information on housing, healthcare, banking, social activities, and cultural events.

The second role of Welcome services can provide social activities that help international students to connect with other students and the local community. Social activities include cultural events, sports teams, and community service projects. These activities help international students feel more comfortable in their new environment and provide

opportunities to practice language skills, learn about new cultures, and develop leadership skills. For example TBU in Zlín provides a "Buddy Program" that pairs international students with Czech students who help them navigate the social and cultural environment (ESN Zlín, 2022).

The third role of Welcome Services can provide academic advising to international students. Academic advising can include course selection, educational planning, and career counselling. Academic advising can help international students to understand the academic requirements and expectations of the institution and the host country. For example, the Tomas Bata University in Zlín offers at its Job Centre academic advising, career counselling, and workshops on study skills and time management. (TBU JOB CENTER, 2023)

The fourth role of Welcome Services can support international students' health and wellness needs. Health and wellness services can include access to medical care, counselling services, and wellness programs. These services can help international students to address physical and mental health concerns, reducing stress and promoting academic success. At the TBU in Zlín, the university provides at its TBU Counselling centre and Psychological Counselling Centre mental health services, health education programs and resources for help to students with Special Needs. (TBU Counselling Centre, 2023)

The fifth role of Welcome Services can provide language support for international students. Language support service is a crucial aspect of welcome services for international students, as it can help students improve their language skills, overcome language barriers, improve their academic performance, and increase their engagement with the host community. Besides, language support programs can help international students develop social connections and feel more comfortable in their new environment. The example of Tomas Bata University in Zlín offering free Czech language courses to international students is an example of how universities can provide language support to their students.

In conclusion, Welcome services enhance international students' overall experience by providing orientation programs, academic support, and social activities. These services can help international students to adjust more quickly to their new environment, build a sense of community and support, and achieve academic success.

1.3 Cross-culture communication differences

Cross-cultural communication differences can pose significant challenges for international students and welcome service providers. Communication difficulties can arise due to differences in language, communication styles, and cultural norms. For example, in some cultures, direct communication is valued, while in others, indirect contact is preferred. These differences can lead to misunderstandings, resulting in frustration and dissatisfaction for international students.

1.3.1 Importance of understanding cultural differences in communication

With the increasing number of international students enrolling in higher education institutions globally, it is essential to understand the cultural differences in communication among them. Communication is crucial to building relationships and ensuring the success of international students' academic and social integration (GEARY, 2016).

Welcome services play a critical role in facilitating communication among international students, and they need to understand and address cultural differences to provide practical support. Understanding cultural differences in communication between international students and welcome services cannot be overstated. Culture shapes how individuals perceive and communicate with one another, and cultural differences can create barriers to effective communication (CAI & RODRIGUEZ, 1996). For international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, welcome services must be aware of these differences and adapt their communication strategies accordingly. For instance, some cultures value indirect communication, while others prefer direct contact. This difference can lead to misunderstandings if not addressed appropriately.

Similarly, differences in nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures, can also create confusion and affect the quality of communication (WAHYUNI, 2017). It is, therefore, important for welcome services to provide cultural sensitivity training to their staff and ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to communicate effectively with international students. This can include training on cross-cultural communication, nonverbal communication, and using interpreters.

In conclusion, understanding cultural differences in communication is critical for welcome services to provide practical support to international students. By providing cultural sensitivity training, using technology to bridge the communication gap, and adapting

communication strategies to suit different cultural backgrounds, welcome services can ensure that international students feel valued, respected, and included in the academic community. This can increase academic and social integration and a positive international student experience.

1.3.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and its relevance to cross-cultural communication

One of the most influential theories in cross-cultural communication is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist, established the concept after conducting significant research on cultural differences between countries and identifying six dimensions that can be used to gauge cultural values and attitudes (HOFSTEDE, 2011). The six dimensions are power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. Each dimension represents a continuum of values and attitudes that can be used to compare cultures and understand differences in communication styles.

One of Hofstede's (2011) key findings is that cultural differences can substantially impact communication styles. People respect authority and hierarchy in cultures with a significant power distance, such as in many Asian and Latin American countries. They may be less likely to express their thoughts or challenge authoritative people openly. People favour equality in civilizations with a low power distance, such as in many Western countries. They may be more likely to share their thoughts or challenge authoritative people publicly. Similarly, people respect independence and autonomy in individualistic cultures such as the United States and many Western European countries, and they may emphasize individual interests over community ones. People in collectivistic cultures, such as many Asian and African countries, cherish communal cohesion and may prioritize group needs over individual needs.

Understanding these cultural distinctions is critical for effective cross-cultural communication, mainly international student welcome services. For example, welcome services for students from individualistic cultures may need to focus on offering individualized support and possibilities for independent learning. On the other hand, those who cater to students from collectivistic cultures may need to foster a sense of community and encourage group-oriented activities. The study discovered that international students from collectivistic cultures had more culture shock and adjustment problems than those from

individualistic cultures, emphasizing the need to know and address cultural variations in welcoming services and other support programs (LIN, 2006).

Finally, Hofstede's cultural aspects theory provides a valuable framework for comprehending cultural variances in communication styles and beliefs. Its use can improve the effectiveness of international students' welcome services. Welcome services can create a more open and welcoming environment that promotes intercultural understanding and enhances the student experience by recognizing and addressing cultural differences.

1.3.3 Comparison of cultural dimensions between the Czech Republic and Global South countries

This thesis aims to understand better communication differences between European countries and countries in the Global South. Specifically, this section presents the cultural dimensions of the Czech Republic and countries in the Global South using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to provide insights into welcome services for international students from the Global South studying in the Czech Republic.

According to Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions theory, the Czech Republic has a relatively low score on *power distance* (57) compared to Global South countries, indicating that Czech society values equality and a more decentralized power structure. In contrast, Global South countries have a higher power distance score, indicating a greater acceptance of hierarchical structures and inequality. With this finding, the Welcome services may need to consider providing more support for students from cultures with higher power distance scores, such as India (with a power distance score of 77), this means that their society values hierarchy and accepts unequal power distribution. Therefore, international students from India who come to study in the Czech Republic may initially find it challenging to adapt to the Czech culture, which values equality and a decentralized power structure. Welcome services can play a crucial role in helping Indian students to adjust by providing them with orientation programs that highlight cultural differences, offering support for academic and social integration, and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that embraces diversity.

Regarding *individualism vs. collectivism*, the Czech Republic has a relatively high score on individualism (58) compared to Global South countries, which generally have lower scores on this dimension, indicating a greater emphasis on collective goals and harmony. Specifically, Brazil has a moderate score on individualism (38), indicating a balance between

individual and collective goals. Welcome services could encourage Brazilian students to participate in both individual and group activities. Kenya has a relatively low score on individualism (27), indicating a strong emphasis on collectivism and group harmony. Welcome services could focus on creating opportunities for Kenyan students to engage in group activities and develop a sense of community.

Regarding *masculinity vs. femininity*, the Czech Republic has a slightly higher score on masculinity (57) compared to Global South countries, indicating a preference for assertiveness, competitiveness, and achievement. Global South countries, on the other hand, generally have lower scores on this dimension, indicating a preference for nurturing and caring values. Specifically, Pakistan, for example, also has a relatively low score on masculinity (50), indicating a preference for nurturing and caring values. Pakistani culture values collectivism, family, and community, which may also contrast with the individualistic culture in the Czech Republic. Welcome services may need to support Pakistani or similar culturally bound students to help them adjust to a more assertive and competitive environment. To give another example from different region, South Africa has a relatively low score on masculinity (63), indicating a preference for nurturing and caring values. South African culture values cooperation, compromise, and consensus, which may contrast with the more assertive and competitive culture of the Czech Republic. Welcome services may therefore need to support South African students to help them adjust to a more robust and competitive environment.

The Czech Republic has a relatively high score on *uncertainty avoidance* (74), indicating a preference for structure, order, and predictability. In contrast, Global South countries generally score lower on this dimension, indicating a greater tolerance for ambiguity and a more flexible approach to rules and regulations. Specifically, for example Indonesia's moderate uncertainty avoidance score (48) indicates the comfort with ambiguity and change. However, Indonesian students may still experience challenges adapting to the Czech Republic's more structured and rule-bound environment. Welcome services could provide assistance and resources to help Indonesian and other students from similar cultures navigate bureaucratic procedures and regulations and support them in managing stress and uncertainty. On the other hand, it is then recommended also to inform the Czech university staff about this preference of students from Global South countries, so they are not so stressed from behaviour to which they are not used.

The Czech Republic has a relatively low score (29) on the *long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension*, indicating a focus on short-term goals and immediate gratification. Global South countries generally score higher on this dimension, meaning a greater emphasis on long-term planning and perseverance. Specifically, Nigeria as another example, has a high score (60) on the long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension, indicating a strong focus on long-term goals and persistence. Welcome services may need to provide resources and support for Nigerian students to help them navigate a culture that values short-term goals and immediate gratification. On the other Indonesia has a high score (78) on the long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension, strongly emphasizing long-term planning and perseverance. Welcome services may need to help students from Indonesia and similar countries, adjust to a culture that emphasizes short-term goals and immediate gratification.

Regarding the *indulgence vs. restraint dimension*, the Czech Republic has a relatively high score (65), indicating a preference for enjoying life and having fun. Global South countries generally have lower scores on this dimension, meaning a greater emphasis on restraint and self-control. Specifically, Mexico has a relatively high score (97) on the indulgence vs. restraint dimension, indicating a strong preference for enjoying life and having fun. As a result, international students from Mexico may find it easier to adjust to the Czech Republic's emphasis on indulgence. However, welcome services can still provide support by helping them find local events and activities that align with their interests.

Overall, welcome services for international students from Global South countries studying in the Czech Republic must be aware of the cultural differences and provide appropriate support to help these students adjust to the cultural differences and feel more included and supported during their studies in the Czech Republic.

1.3.4 Strategies for effective cross-cultural communication in Welcome services

Marketing welcome services to international students from various cultural backgrounds require understanding of cross-cultural communication differences. Effective cross-cultural communication is essential for creating successful welcome service programs that cater to the unique needs of international students.

Several selected studies have been examined and summarized to consider the specifics of communication differences between European countries and countries of the Global South. Particularly then for international students from the Global South who came to study in the Czech Republic. Communicating with international students must consider linguistic,

cultural, and social differences (WILCZEWSKI & ALON, 2022). This requires the development of targeted communication strategies that acknowledge and respect these differences. Moreover, the Global South is a diverse and complex area with varying cultural norms and communication styles that differ significantly from the cultures of European countries.

In European cultures, communication tends to be more direct and explicit, whereas contact in the Global South is often more indirect and implicit. Therefore, universities marketing welcome services to students from the Global South should use more indirect and implicit forms of communication to reach this population effectively. In many Global South countries, people tend to be more collectivist and value relationships and personal connections over individual achievement (HOFSTEDE G. H., 2001). This means that international students from such countries may prioritize building connections with faculty and university staff over academic performance and may require additional support and guidance to navigate the university's educational environment. On the other hand, in many European countries, people tend to be more individualistic and focus on achieving individual goals, such as academic success. Thus, universities could adapt their welcome services to support these students' educational purposes better and provide appropriate tutoring and academic advising resources.

The differences in language, social norms, and academic expectations challenge international students who choose to study. Language is a significant barrier; for example, Czech is not widely spoken outside the country, and English proficiency among locals is limited. This makes it challenging for international students to communicate with their peers and professors, leading to isolation and frustration (LAURING & SELMER, 2010). Besides, language competence is a critical factor affecting the life satisfaction of international students. Students who do not speak the language fluently may struggle to communicate with locals, participate in social activities, and adjust to the new environment. In some cases, international students may also face discrimination and stereotype from their peers or residents, which can hurt their mental health and well-being. International students struggle to adapt to this culture of respect for authority figures and emphasizing rote memorization (BOCHNER, 1982).

In addition, academic expectations, for example, in the Czech Republic, differ from other countries. Czech higher education emphasizes independent learning and critical thinking, at least compared with the traditional approach to learning in some countries of the Global

South (according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory). The academic culture in the Czech Republic is often more formal and hierarchical than in other countries. International students, particularly those from the Global South, may struggle to adapt to this culture of respect for authority figures and the emphasis on rote memorization. International students often struggle to adjust to this new academic environment, affecting their academic performance and overall experience. Furthermore, social norms and customs differ significantly between the Czech Republic and the Global South. In contrast to several cultures in the Global South, Czech society places high importance on timeliness and personal space. International students from other cultures must adjust their behaviour and communication styles to fit these cultural norms, which can be challenging. (HOFSTEDE Insights, 2022)

International students from the Global South studying in the Czech Republic encounter various challenges in obtaining visas for international students (MODRÁ, 2019). The report discussed the difficulties of obtaining permits for international students in the Czech Republic. The complex visa process, which includes multiple steps and documentation, can be daunting and stressful for students. The author emphasized the importance of improving visa policies and procedures to support international students better. The report found that the visa process was a significant source of stress and anxiety for the students, as they had to provide numerous documents and navigate a complex bureaucracy. Some students reported feeling frustrated with the lack of clear information and support from the university, which made the process even more challenging.

1.4 Development of services offered to international students and researchers

For the needs of international students, academic staff and post-docs must be fully prepared also the internal environment of universities, from information systems and administration to accommodation and other services.

This requirement should be reflected in the quality assessment of the university's activities and its implementation supported by methodological support. With regard to the involvement of universities in the Erasmus+ programme, it is also necessary to comply with the conditions the Erasmus+ Charter for ECHE Higher Education, including the care of students in academic and non-academic activities and their support in the provision of accommodation. (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020)

● Expected actions at level of Higher educational institutions (HEI): Develop and innovate infrastructure, information infrastructure, information, advisory services and facilities for international students and staff, thus creating an attractive environment for them.

Universities should create "Welcome centres" to provide foreign prospective students, students and staff to provide a wide range of support services to facilitate their stay in the Czech Republic, including support for the visa process, the process of recognition of foreign education and qualifications, study counselling, assistance with obtaining accommodation, etc. To this end, universities should cooperate with the EURAXESS Czech Republic centre. (EURAXESS Czech Republic, 2022)

● Expected actions at the HEI level: cooperate with international student clubs and support their activities, develop integration activities for foreign students and staff.

● Funding is possible from European structural and Investment funds (ESIF) (Ministry of Regional Development CZ, 2023). Support will also be provided for the development of language and intercultural competences of non-academic staff in universities.

Satisfaction of international students with the availability and offer of services through a questionnaire survey in cooperation with the universities will be regularly checked by the DZS. (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020)

1.5 Cooperation with international students and graduates

Accordingly, to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (2020), it is necessary to work actively and systematically with the growing group of international students and graduates of Czech universities. As the international students and graduates represent a great potential for promoting Czech universities and establishing cooperation at various levels (economic, cultural, political, etc.). Successful international graduates increase the prestige and attractiveness of universities and thus help to attract potential applicants. They can also be directly involved in supporting the recruitment of international students, for example as active ambassadors for the university or as volunteers at events for applicants in their home countries. Alumni can also mentor current students, provide information about internships or job offers, and connect universities with the professional sphere. Through their involvement in various personal and professional networks, alumni can be a rich source of contacts and can contribute to the institutional and international objectives of the universities by working with them. The existence of an alumni network

also increases the attractiveness of the university for applicants by making it easier to find job contacts and employment after graduation. International students should be actively involved in alumni programmes during their studies in order to build a strong enough link to the institution.

In connection with previously mentioned, there were presented some expected actions at HEI level: with possibilities of Funding for – Setting-up own system of cooperation with foreign students and graduates, develop own alumni programme (organisation of events for current international students, include students to promote study in the Czech Republic through a students´ blogs and active group of ambassadors, surveys among international students) and involve international students and alumni in the promotion of the university.. (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020)

1.6 Definition of Terms

Welcome services – this a relatively new term in the understanding of TBU in Zlín refers to the support and assistance provided to international students which enhance their experience from study at TBU in Zlín and within the local community. These services may include orientation programs, language courses, accommodation assistance, translations and interpreting assistance, cultural events, and other resources aimed at helping international students integrate into the university and local community smoothly.

International students – for the purposes of this thesis and reality of TBU in Zlín are as International students understood **all individuals who are pursuing higher education at TBU in Zlín except for the citizens of Czech or Slovak republics**. As you can see also clearly graphically pinpointed at Figure 4 Reasoning for this is based on fact that Czech Republic shared for better part of 20th century its history with Slovakia in the form of Czechoslovakia statehood, the closeness and similarities of language and culture in between Czech and Slovak citizens, together with one of the most peaceful country divisions ever recorded, are together with nearly 21 thousands Slovak students (Czech statistical Office, 2022) reasons why we do not consider students from Slovakia merely as foreigners.

Internationals – As internationals will be, for purposes of this thesis and reality of TBU in Zlín, addressed all international students studying at TBU in Zlín, nonetheless their language of study instructions, their origin, study mode programme or length of study. Together with them this term roofs also all international employees of TBU such as international academics

and researchers of all possible levels and also non-academic international employees at the university.

International office - International Office at TBU in Zlín is a department responsible for supporting international students in their integration into the university and the local community. Its primary role is to provide administrative assistance, guidance, and support together with its Faculty coordinators to international students throughout their stay at TBU in Zlín and also to local students and TBU employees aiming for international experience both at home and abroad. The International Office also coordinates various activities and events aimed at promoting intercultural exchange and understanding among students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, the International Office collaborates with other departments and external organizations to develop and implement policies, procedures, and programs that support the needs and interests of local and international students and employees in the areas of international activities. (TBU International Office, 2022a)

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Main objective

The main goal of this thesis is to identify and analyse problems and challenges faced by foreign students of TBU in Zlín in connection with the Welcome services provided, and subsequently to propose evidence-based recommendations for improvements to further support the positive experience of international students with the institution.

2.2 Target groups

- Long-term International students in English programmes

- Long-term International students in Czech programmes

2.3 Research questions

RQ1: What are the most common problem areas faced by international students at TBU in Zlín in connection with the Welcome services provided?

RQ2: How do these problems and challenges impact the international students' overall experience at TBU in Zlín?

RQ3: How do the experiences and recommendations for changes differ within set target groups?

2.4 Research methods

2.4.1 Design of Research

The research methods used in this thesis consist of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The study begins with a comprehensive review of the literature on the marketing of welcome services in tertiary educational systems, cross-cultural communication differences, and specifics of communication differences between European countries and countries of the global south. This review provides the theoretical foundation for the research questions and objectives of the thesis.

2.4.2 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through a semi-structured qualitative interview with 16 international students and alumni of TBU in Zlín. The analysis involved identifying patterns

and themes in the data related to the research questions and objectives of the thesis. The interview questions were developed based on the research questions and objectives of the thesis. The interviews were conducted in English and Czech languages, depending on the preference of the participant. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed, and analysed by method of thematic analysis.

After conducting the initial 16 qualitative interviews, and analysis of thereof, it was decided to circulate the same set of qualitative questions among all international students studying at TBU in Zlín. This was done to ensure that the data sample collected was fully saturated and all possible concerns and problems faced by international students were captured and not influenced by the primary more limited number of participants.

16 subsequent online qualitative questionnaires were collected from international students in English language and 12 answers from international students in Czech language, in order to further expand the data pool and ensure that neither language barriers nor limited scope of first part of research did not hinder the data collection process. The questions were formulated to probe deeper into the specific challenges and problems that international students faced in relation to the Welcome services provided at TBU in Zlín.

The data collected from the subsequent questionnaires were analysed in conjunction with the data from the initial interviews to determine if any new themes or issues emerged. However, no new unique problems or challenges were identified in the subsequent data collection, indicating that the data had reached a saturation point.

The findings from the qualitative research was then analysed and used to develop a Confirmatory follow-up quantitative questionnaire, which aimed to gauge the prevalence and importance of the identified challenges and problems among different groups of international students. The quantitative questionnaire was distributed to all international students at TBU in Zlín. However, the time constraints reached at that point critical level so only partial sample of data on experiences and attitudes with recommended improvements of Welcome services was used only as confirmatory sample for validation chapter.

This mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of international students in relation to the Welcome services provided by TBU in Zlín. It also provides a more robust and nuanced set of data that can be used to inform evidence-based recommendations for upgrading these services.

2.4.3 Validation seeking methods

Due to the time constraints associated with a challenging amount of time for diploma thesis delivery the necessity has arisen to choose a timely effective validation method(s) to gauge the potential impact of the proposed changes on international students' satisfaction without need to wait for their implementation. For this purpose, two following methods have been chosen:

2.4.3.1 Pre-implementation feedback

Pre-implementation feedback on the proposed changes to the welcome services given by the international students itself was done by administering a follow-up questionnaire. This allowed to gather the opinions of the primary target group receiving the welcome services on whether the proposed changes will address their needs and preferences, and potentially lead to improved wellbeing.

2.4.3.2 Expert validation

In terms of Expert validation researcher sought feedback from the most senior university staff from area of International affairs, as experts on international education and decision makers, whose provided their professional insights helped to further clarify the feasibility, relevance, and potential impact of the proposed changes of Welcome services on international students.

By incorporating feedback from the people directly involved in managing the Welcome services, it was ensured that the proposed suggestions will not only be relevant but also feasible and practical in the specific context of the TBU in Zlín.

2.4.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and guidelines. Participants were provided with information about the study and informed consent was obtained before the interviews. The participants were ensured of their confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The study also adhered to the data protection regulations in force in the Czech Republic.

II.   ANALYSIS

3   ANALYSIS OF CURRENT STATE OF WELCOME SERVICES AT TBU IN ZLÍN

The traditional scope of university Welcome activities and services typically includes a range of events and programs designed to support new students as they transition to the university environment. This may include orientation sessions, campus tours, welcome receptions, and information sessions on topics such as academic expectations, campus resources, and community involvement opportunities. Universities may also offer specific services to help international students adjust to life in a new country, such as language classes, cultural integration programs, and assistance with immigration and visa-related matters. The goal of these Welcome activities and services is to help new students feel supported and connected to the university community, and to provide them with the tools and resources they need to succeed academically and personally.

3.1   University overview of TBU in Zlín

Even though Tomas Bata University in Zlín is the youngest Czech university, it has been already ranked among the top universities worldwide (according to QS and THE rankings). Moreover, TBU is ranked among top 40 universities founded after 2000. According to the THE ranking, TBU is ranked as the best Czech university in Business and Economics. (TBU in Zlín, 2023)

Founded in 2001, Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně (Tomas Bata University in Zlín) is a non-profit public higher-education institution located in the urban setting of the small city of Zlín (population range of 50,000-249,999 inhabitants), Zlín Region. This institution also has a branch campus in Uherské Hradište. Officially recognized by the Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy České republiky (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic), Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíne (UTB) is a large (uniRank enrolment range: 10,000-14,999 students) coeducational Czech higher education institution. Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíne (UTB) offers courses and programs leading to officially recognized higher education degrees in several areas of study. See the uniRank degree levels and areas of study matrix below for further details. (UniRank, 2023)

This 22 years old Czech higher-education institution has a selective admission policy based on entrance examinations. The admission rate range is 50-60% making this Czech higher education organization a averagely selective institution. International students are welcome

to apply for enrolment. UTB also provides several academic and non-academic facilities and services to students including a library, housing, sports facilities, financial aids and/or scholarships, study abroad and exchange programs, online courses and distance learning opportunities, as well as administrative services. (UniRank, 2023)

Accordingly, to the same source (UniRank, 2023) is TBU in Zlín presently ranked as 16th out of 58 of Higher educational institutions (universities) in the Czech Republic.

3.2 Scope and evolution of Welcome services provided by TBU

Welcome services at Tomas Bata University in Zlín (further TBU in Zlín) were designed to assist international students before, during and after their arrival for study. They were gradually built in previous 20 years together with the young university itself. The scope of TBU welcome activities and services is to facilitate a smooth transition for new students into the university environment and to enhance their overall university experience. These activities and services aim to provide students with the necessary support, guidance, and resources to help them adjust to a new cultural, academic, and social setting.

3.2.1 List of provided Welcome services at TBU

Based on the internal sources data provided, the standard list of provided Welcome services at TBU in Zlín includes:

- Centralized help with Admission process for all foreign speaking students

- Assistance with accommodation and visa issues

- Orientation events and activities for new international students

- Buddy programme connecting new international students with local students

- Assistance with accommodation and visa issues

- Language courses in Czech and English

- Cultural and social events

- Health-care assistance

- Career guidance and job search support

- Counselling services for academic and personal issues

- Sports and recreation facilities and activities

It is worth pointing out that these services are not aimed only at international students itself but with help of TBU office of HR and personnel and support *of "EURAXESS – Researchers in motion"* initiative also at incoming international researchers.

Let's scrutinize some these areas of Welcome services in more thorough look:

3.2.2   Centralized admission process

For efficiency reasons was then decided to centralize the Welcome services and also admission process for English programmes, to make sure that the effectiveness of the outcome can be reached and positive results can be assured.

Therefore, admissions to all English-speaking study programmes, nonetheless their longevity (if Exchange-study or long-term degree study) are all methodically guided by TBU International office including the Assessments of previous foreign study for purposes of admission at the Rectorate/Library university building with close cooperation of International departments of every respective faculty.

For purposes of clarity let it be mentioned that author of this thesis previously served at this department as a methodical lead for admissions to long-term English Degree programmes for period of 4 years (2017-2021).

3.2.3   Assistance with Visa issues

This part of Welcome services is provided as well through staff of central International office of the TBU rectorate. At TBU it is considered generally part of admission as due to the strict visa and immigration policies of the Czech Republic, the process of receiving the study visa is a major choke point for the whole admission process which ends by successful visa procedure and final arrival and enrolment of student for their studies at TBU. As noted already in theoretical part it is also internationally considered as one of the top stress factors for international students arriving to study to the new country.

There has been a considerable improvement in a quality of services aimed to ease the whole process of applying for a study visa. As all Czech universities faced similar problems in helping their prospective applicants through the visa process the special "Student Mode" (SM) was created to concept of visa facilitation for students-foreigners from selected third countries who are admitted to study at higher education institutions in the Czech Republic and at the same time they are enrolled in the Student Mode. (Ministry of Education Youth and Sports, 2017)

The function of SM is to accelerate access to the relevant embassy for an applicant seeking a long-term residence permit/visa for the purpose of studies. The SM is administered through Higher Education Institutions which nominate their students for the Student Mode. Even after approval of TBU within the institutions approved for Student Mode on 17th August 2017, which was administered by the author of the thesis, it is not possible to state that all problems have been solved as the number of approved visas by Czech embassies abroad have strict capacity limitations but at least the whole process is now much easier. As the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is organizing by-weekly intakes for nominations of newly accepted international students based on their priorities (Doctoral, Master´s, Bachelor´s students in Czech and then English study programmes in descending order), the nominations from all universities and tertiary educational institutions are gathered and compared against the set quota. Approved nominations which makes the cut are then within 2 days transferred and distributed by Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the appropriate Czech diplomatic missions abroad. The diplomatic missions have then one week to contact every one of the nominated students with the proposal of the visa appointment date within the next two weeks. (Ministry of Education Youth and Sports, 2017)

By this new procedure was achieved shortening the waiting times for our successful applicants to acceptable times. As before functioning of this system was without bribery practically impossible to get a visa appointment in lots of Global South countries in timely manner.

3.2.4 Assistance with accommodation

Accommodation is then its own problematic chapter. Finding affordable accommodation in the vicinity of the university was a problem for considerable number of students which also confirmed the internal survey of satisfaction with provided accommodation of long-term international students who studied at TBU within years 2018 – 2021 as seen in the next Figure 1. (TBU International Office, 2021a)

Figure 1: Satisfaction with provided accommodation of international students, Source: (TBU International Office, 2021a)

Where mainly the capacity and quality of the accommodation was seen as the issue. The present TBU accommodation capacities are still limited but after finish of this survey the TBU was able to secure long-term rent of nearby Hotel Garni where are presently being accommodated also Doctoral international students and in the terms of improving quality of accommodation there was finished reconstruction of U7 dormitory, at the beginning of academic year, which now adheres to the present accommodation standards of modern European university.

As for the practical assistance with booking the accommodation, every accepted international student, regardless their study programme or language of instructions is provided written information in their preferred language about necessity of booking accommodation via online portal iskam.utb.cz which is licenced for usage by TBU. (TBU Halls of Residence and Refectories, 2022)

Both Exchange and Long-term International students in English programmes in addition receive step-by-step PDF - ISKaM bed booking guide – as a part of Information package by e-mail together with the admission documents with further instructions to book their bed for their upcoming study in Zlín ahead by registering at iskam.utb.cz and paying the booking deposit (presently CZK 3000). Same manual is also available online in the document section of the TBU Hall of Residence and Refectories (HRR) (2022).

In case the incoming international students do not succeed with booking the proposed accommodation within the premises of university dormitories they are directed to TBU Welcome officer (presently author of this thesis) where they will be provided extensive help until some valid accommodation is found for them.

3.2.5 Health-care assistance

First step of every international student is to achieve required health insurance. Assistance here varies along slightly different lines in terms of target groups.

3.2.5.1 Health insurance assistance for EU/EEA/Swiss/UK students

EU based international students are mostly holders of European Union health insurance cards and as such they are directed by the International office staff to the closest branch of General Health Insurance Company of the Czech Republic (VZP) to receive Form called Confirmation temporarily replacing European health insurance card. In that case such international student will be treated in the scope of "medically necessary health care" same as a Czech citizen. Medically necessary healthcare includes everything that is medically required by the patient's medical condition and that is similarly provided under the Czech public health insurance system. The scope of care provided is based on the expected duration of stay in the Czech Republic. The scope of care is primarily determined by the attending physician.

3.2.5.2 Health insurance assistance for all other international students

All other international students with no entitlement to Czech health services are then being instructed to purchase commercial health insurance at the local branch of pVZP a.s. which by the Czech law holds presently monopoly on offering complex Health insurance for foreigners. This insurance must in any case fulfil specific minimal coverage conditions of Complex health insurance. (pVZP, a.s., 2023) This came to existence due to the previous bad experience Czech based providers of health care with various range of commercial health insurance policies of many local insurance companies which competed mainly by low-price and did not offered sufficient coverage. So, this monopoly was stated to make sure that no debts of unpaid health-care will cripple Czech health-care system.

3.2.5.3 Health-care personal assistance

Due to the efforts of previous Vice-rector for Internationalization was at 2021 finally secured local General Practitioner (GP) which agreed to register and treat our international students as their attending GP for purposes of their medical wellbeing. His condition was that the solely English-speaking international students should be accompanied by a Czech speaking translator to assure flawless translations and will limit chance for unintended errors. At the same time was secured cooperation also of one local attending gynaecologist with sufficient English proficiency which assures maximum privacy of feminine students.

Persistent problem then remains **inability to secure any provider of complex dental services** in closer of wider Zlín area as even accordingly to info from pVZP,a.s. which insures all our international students there are no dentists in Zlín or its vicinity who would be accepting new clients.

Support welcome services provided in this area presently differs along the lines of Czech proficiency. International students from Czech taught study programmes do not receive in this time generally any support services at all and all expected to get all necessary information in the same way as local Czech and Slovak students.

Both Exchange and long-term English-speaking students are then instructed about possibility to contact in case of health issues either their insurance company via the mobile number printed on their health insurance card or in case of need they should contact either their Buddy (if such buddy was allocated to them the TBU Welcome officer, who can accompany them to the UTB General Practitioner or directly to the local hospital. In case of severe health problems, they are encouraged to call immediately directly 112 - The Emergency number which works within the whole EU and which complete operational staff has solid English fluency and can address any health problems with high competence.

Mental healthcare is as previously, mentioned in theoretical part, taken care mostly by team of TBU Centre for Special Needs and Psychological Counselling Centre, both roofed under (TBU Counselling Centre, 2023).

3.2.6   Language courses

TBU provides range of both free and paid language courses for its students and applicants.

The only paid language course which started as the initiative of the Office of Vice-Rector for Internationalization and which is provided and managed presently by Faculty of

Humanities is the Intensive two-semestral course of Czech Language – which serves as a preparatory course to reach B2 level Czech proficiency accordingly to the CEFR scale. (CEFR, 2022) This course gives a chance to anyone who would like to study at the Czech university in Czech language programme (therefore without necessity to pay the tuition fee as the study programmes in Czech language are free for everyone nonetheless their citizenship, or nationality). (TBU in Zlín, 2022)

Figure 2: Preparatory Czech language course at apply.utb.cz

TBU also offers range of free language courses for all its students:

- Evening Czech language course for beginners

  - Target group: New international students from all English programmes

- Evening Czech language course at intermediate level

  - Target group: Second and higher years´ international student in all English programmes

- Afternoon Czech language course for Ukrainian refugee students

Except for that there are regularly offered language courses of English, German, French or Spanish depending on the availability of resources and demand from students. Those courses are a regular part of TBU curriculum and as such are taught in Czech so they are not

exclusively aimed at international students, but they are freely accessible to all international students with Czech language proficiency.

3.2.7   Cultural and social events

3.2.7.1   *Faculty based events*

Most faculties organize various social events for its students in terms of Open days, Christmas meet-up/parties. These events are usually not divided in its attention in between Czech or International students but their target group focus can be separated on events for Ph.D. student or students in Bachelor´s and Master´s programmes. The most active in this area is Faculty of Multimedia Communications (FMC) which offers many social events which falls in the category "Let us make you feel Welcomed" for all of its students such as:

- Various exhibitions, creative workshops, conferences (Department of Multimedia Communication, 2023)

- Team building events at various occasions

- Meetup of students with Dean

- Christmas party

- Recently also Celebrations of 20 years of FMC

- Zlín Design Week

Here special mention deserves definitely annual two-semestral student aimed project of the collaboration in between students and departments of Faculty of Multimedia Communications called **Zlín Design Week** is a week-long design festival where everyone can find inspiration. Through ZDW we create a platform for young designers and professionals to meet, present, express, share and create new professional and social connections. It supports young talents and bring a new ideas to the design industry and local community. (Faculty of Multimedia Communications, 2023)

During spring of 2022 FMC also organized whole university collection of basic needs at the beginning of the Ukraine Crisis where was appreciated active participation of international students with active knowledge or Russian or Ukrainian languages in logistics and packaging operations of preparing and sending collected aid items to Ukraine.

3.2.7.2 International festival

Is organized by UTB International office as by unit aimed especially on communication with international students and applicants or Czech students willing to study abroad is organizing the annual International festival which brings during one day together international and local students from all branches and parts of university and gives a chance to meet and tastes personally different cultures, people and it is a chance for all students to create new friendships and to become the ambassadors of their own culture.

3.2.8 Orientation events and activities for new international students

This part of Welcome services has several areas depending on who is providing it. The part so far differs a lot in terms what orientation It also depends on the target group.

First of all it is necessary to say that upon arriving for study at every faculty the new TBU international students receive a warm welcome from their respective faculty/department international study advisors and that there are being various social event organized by specific faculties towards their Czech and international students and applicants (with example of: Days of open doors, Christmas parties, orientation meetings for new students, teambuilding events, etc.

There is a lot of various events belonging to this section mostly Organized by **TBUs´ International Office** which also provides support of further Welcome units such as TBU Welcome centre on page 43, International offices at every respective faculty or department and also supports ESN Zlín in their numerous volunteer activities as described on page 45.

International students studying in Czech language programmes – it is worth to mention that they are presently most declined group in this context as so far it is expected that due to their "proficiency" in Czech language they do not require much of the support services and except for the assistance with their visa problematics and during Covid+ also with vaccinations arrival rules and emergency guidance protocols, they were not receiving much of the attention in the past.

3.2.9 TBU Welcome centre and its services

History of TBU Welcome centre started during 2021 in an effort of TBU International office to provide better and possibly complex care in the scope of new challenges in the area of care of arriving internationals at TBU.

As already discussed in the chapter - 1.4 TBU Welcome centre is being gradually created accordingly to instructions of (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020) as mentioned in the Strategy for Internationalization of university education from 2021, where ministry requires the creation of such centres until 2023.

Further factors which contributed to creation of this centre were discussed and analysed in the chapter - Factors contributing to necessity of enhancements

For better picture about present state of emerging TBU Welcome centre and its scope of operations:

Present structure of Welcome centre:

Staffing: All Welcome services prepared and provided by TBU Welcome are presently handled by full-time Welcome officer with the help of temporary intern(s) and volunteers recruited mostly from the ranks of TBU international students and interconnectedly also ESN Zlín members.

TBU Welcome centre target groups:

- TBU Internationals as defined in Definition of terms on page 27

- Local students and TBU employees in contact with TBU Internationals

Present scope of activities aimed at TBU Internationals:

- Support of TBU Internationals with interpreting and translations to ensure smooth communication with any and all Czech institutions outside of TBU such as:

    o Foreign and local Police force departments

    o Department of Immigration and Asylum Policy (OAMP) of Ministry of Interior

    o Providers of medical care (doctors and hospitals)

    o Health insurance companies

    o Financial Office of the Czech Republic (Tax office)

- o Possible Accommodators and other providers of services

- Personal assistance and/or problem-solving guidance while dealing with all previously mentioned institutions and areas

- Guidance in any day-to-day life problems of TBU international

- Cooperation with Czech language teacher(s) about their teaching activities aimed towards bettering the Czech proficiency of TBU international students/researchers.

- Communication and cooperation with volunteer organisation ESN Zlín

- Motivation of international students to participate in prepared Czech language courses and other activities.

- And newly (as the necessity has arisen) also Crisis intervention help for international students

- Long-term cooperation with EURAXESS Czech Republic at Czech Academy of Sciences in providing complex care and guidance to TBU Internationals.

Communication channels used:

- Face to face personal communication – preferred by most international students from high-context countries (over 90% of long-term international students in English degree programmes) and also by Welcome officer for creating and maintaining relationships with international students and discussing more complex problems.

- E-mail communication – preferred by Welcome officer for paperwork based problematics and non-urgent communication issues

- Mobile phone communication – in urgent matters all students can reach their Welcome officer on assigned mobile contact 24/7, although due to the single staffing of Welcome centre the absolutive positive response rate cannot be guaranteed in 24:00 – 06:00 times of Central-European Time Zone.

- WhatsApp and Messenger communication – used less formal or urgent operational communication inquiries towards the Welcome centre staff and back.

- Social media communication and information posting.

Newly emerging TBU Welcome Centre has presently just relocated to Welcome office at U3 which is university service building next to the biggest student dormitories in Zlín (U12 and MSI buildings) where most of international students are accommodated. At the same building and corridor are next to each other located also offices of university psychologists offering their services to all TBU students and employees, TBU Students union organizing various cultural and social activities for students and volunteer organisation ESN Zlín which supports international students.

As was already mentioned in Theoretical part of this thesis - the Czech Republic is in majority still considered "non-English" speaking country as many of its citizens do not feel that their English proficiency is sufficient to lead conversation in English so the job of Welcome centre in non-English speaking country is primarily aimed to help to all surrounding stakeholders to ensure that the level of mutual language and also cultural mis-understandings will be minimized and mutual understanding of both mentioned areas will be able to be kept at utmost peaceful and respectful values.

 Advantages of such arrangement lies in a fact that students have it close by in terms of coming to discuss their problems and it is not in the heart of formal and official university premises where they would possibly not feel so comfortable to share their problems. Disadvantages can be seen in the fact that for purposes of newly arriving TBU Internationals at TBU in Zlín can be little more challenging to find the Welcome office as it is secluded side from other university buildings. Further evaluation depends on the priorities and tasks for the Welcome staff.

There was a discussion and preparations of creating more representative space for TBU Welcome centre also in the premises of main university Rectorate/Library U13 building which would be more suitably centred for purposes of TBU internationals.

3.2.10 Erasmus Student Network (ESN) Zlín

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) Zlín is a local branch of European volunteer student organization that works to support and develop student mobilities, with a particular focus

on international students designed to help international students to integrate into the local community and to make the most of their time in Zlín.

ESN Zlín is supported in its activities by TBU International office in terms of resources, office space and financial support and pro international students offers following:

- Welcome week and orientation events for newly arrived international students

- Social events, such as parties, game nights, karaoke nights, pub crawls but also Walking of the dogs from local shelter

- Cultural events, including country presentations and movie nights

- Language exchanges and tandem learning events

- Sports events, such as tournaments, or attending local sports matches

- Excursions and trips to nearby cities, landmarks, and cultural sites in or even out of Czech Republic

- Volunteering and community service opportunities

Even if it can be understood that events organized by ESN are by its purpose mostly aimed towards international students, in reality most of their events aims to interconnect both local and international students together. By the very nature of this volunteer organization where mostly local students volunteers first to become Buddies to help international students and subsequently have a chance to grow within this organization in different roles ranging from organizing cross-cultural events to managing finances, meeting, logistics of international group and team, which gives all of them valued experience and competences connected with management of international teams (newly international students can also became members of a team as all official proceedings switched to English). Their flagship serial event called **Country presentations** which is organized on a bi-weekly basis throughout every semester´s teaching period then gives a chance to international students to present their country and university from which they came and target audience are both English speaking international students together with English speaking local students who would like to find out more about different cultures, specific places or even abroad partner universities where they can then go for their own Erasmus+ or other exchange experience.

3.2.11 Factors contributing to necessity of enhancements

With rising total numbers of international students not only at TBU but also nationally (as seen in Chapter named Growing numbers of international students) and difficult situations of previous years, with **COVID+ epidemy and recent war at Ukraine**, which caused further influx of new students from our partner universities located in this war-torn country, the urgent need has arisen to speed-up the evolution of TBU Welcome services beyond their previously traditional and merely maintenance-based scope.

ⓘ Total number of international students at TBU in Zlín

Figure 3 – Total numbers of international students at TBU in Zlín in its history
Source: (TBU International Office, 2021a)

As seen from the *Figure 4* the year of 2020 seemingly brought lower number of new international student, which should in theory meant the less labour intensive year for Welcome services staff. In reality it is worth note, it was rather the opposite case. As on Friday, 13th of March 2020 was in Czech Republic proclaimed first nation-wide lockdown and in terms of international students majority of problems overnight multiplied. From terms of mandatory lockdowns from all persons arriving from so called "at-risk" foreign countries (Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic, 2020) to the fact that the university infrastructure was not ready for full-fledged remote teaching or 7-days a week delivery of 3 course meals for the quarantined international students – which were during first lockdown put to 2-weeks long after arrival quarantines from which they were forbidden to leave even for personal

grocery shopping. Czech students were sent home for remote schooling with exception of the students in medical or social-care fields which were ordered to help with this emergency situation.

3.2.12 Growing numbers of international students

Accordingly, to Czech statistical Office (2022) numbers of foreigners at universities in the Czech Republic has been growing continuously since 2001, on average by one tenth per year. The share of students of foreign nationality has been steadily increasing also over the last ten years and has risen by one third in absolute terms (33.6%).

In 2020, the share of foreign students at Czech universities reached 17% form all students. In the long term, the highest interest in studying in the Czech Republic has been shown by Slovaks, followed by students from the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In total, 50,441 foreigners with 165 different nationalities studied at a Czech university in 2020. (Czech statistical Office, 2021)

Total numbers of foreign students at TBU in Zlín were in last decade growing only sporadically with rapid growth recorded just in the last 2 years. Due Thanks to the professional involvement of the thesis researcher himself, it can be stated with absolute certainty that reasons for this rapid growth are as follows:

- Approval of institutional accreditation for TBU in Zlín in 2019 (Tomas Bata University in Zlín, 2019)

- Start of the Russia/Ukraine conflict in 2021

As the effect of Russia/Ukraine has yet to be determined exactly (however numbers of Ukraine students rose up from last February by more then 100% (TBU International office, 2022b) lets discuss more thoroughly the second topic without which we would not have bee able to accept so many new international students from all the countries including Ukraine.

3.2.13 Approval of institutional accreditation

Before approval if institutional accreditation were international applicants, who wanted to get eligible for admission at under-graduate level of any tertiary educational facility, forced to go through what was called the "Nostrification process." Which is dense bureaucratical procedure provided by local county offices (Krajské úřady) and which could customarily took anything between 1 month (in case the student/applicant in questions was already

physically present at the set country with all originals of his diplomas and transcripts, which had to be prior to that properly verified to the degree of Notary verification, APOSTILLE or Super-legalization by Ministry of country which issued the Diploma and Czech embassy overseeing that country) to 12 months (in case the student/applicant is not present and wanted to do it anyway – for that it was mostly necessary for him to acquire usually 2 – 3 short term tourist visas to enter Czech Republic temporarily to travel here for: Applying for nostrification (Mandatory has to be done in person), possible balancing examinations (to ensure their knowledge is comparable with Czech Republic educational standards) and then after several months co come back (also in person) for acquiring the Nostrification document. For the whole process it was also necessary to have Czech based mailing address. (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2023)

For the Master´s and Doctoral applicants who wanted to recognize their previous university study, the process of Recognition of their Higher Education and Qualifications acquired abroad was possible to be done by any Czech university who had at the moment of such application accredited same or Similar (at least 60% of same subjects passed) study programme which applicant requested to Recognize. If the similarities were not found in sufficient amount whole Request was then being sent to the Ministry of Youth of Education of Czech Republic which in result also took at least 3 – 12 months of there and back processing – just to recognize that set applicant is eligible for admission to Czech university.

Result of these constrains was, that based on internal data of TBU´s International office (2017-2022) there were on average only 1-2 applicants to bachelor´s programmes per year and even number of successful applicants to Master´s and Doctoral programmes who were able to receive and deliver all provided documents within the admission process were severely limited with highest recorded (pre Regime Student) time reached less then 200 successful Recognitions of previous university study per year. (TBU International office, 2022b)

After approval of institutional accreditation, the central TBU International office established service of:

3.2.13.1 Assessment of previous foreign education

Thanks to this service can every international applicant for study at the TBU apply for a much faster process of Assessment of their previous foreign education without further delays. (TBU International Office, 2021b) Just by delivering properly verified documents

and paying Assessment fee and filling in the form with the details of the educational institution, the responsible person will then proceed with the assessment and the applicant can have the results maximally in matter of days or weeks, after it will be possible to verify if the institution in question had a right to issue such diploma. Responsible officer of TBU International office will after successful assessment inform all parties – a.k.a. international applicant and also the appropriate study department of TBU university which is managing application for study in question. As if the applicant is not applying to English but Czech study programme his application is managed solely by Czech study department of set faculty. (TBU International office, 2022c)
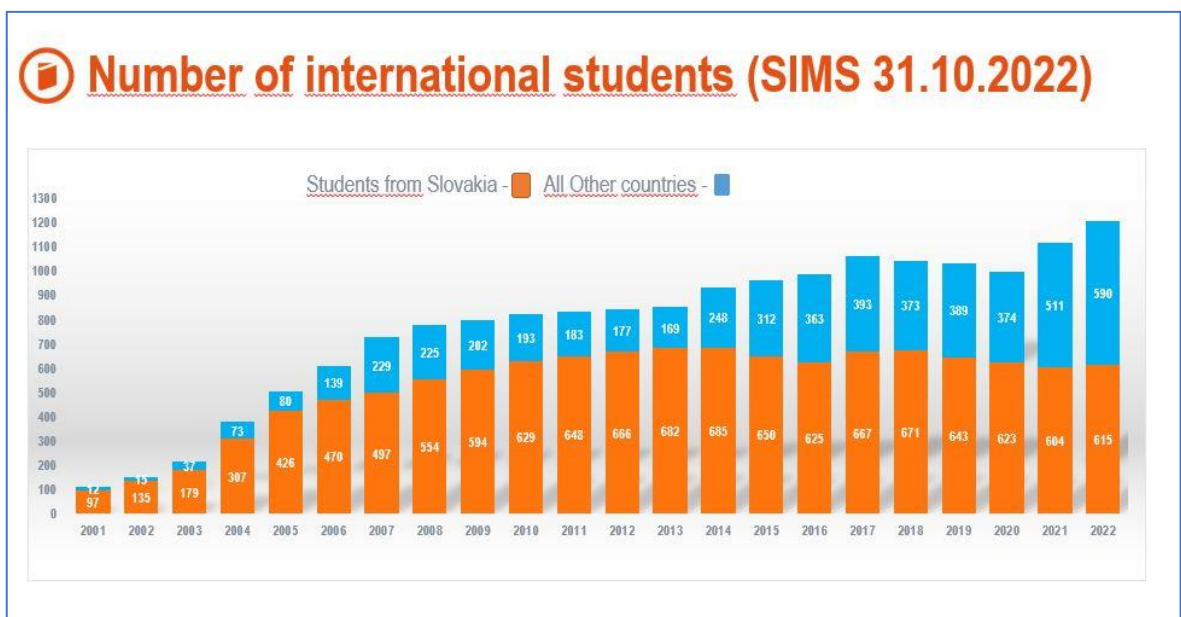

Figure 4 – Numbers of international students at TBU in Zlín in 2022 accordingly to the Czech national SIMS metrics database. Source: Internal TBU document named„Prezentace statistik UTB 2022" by International office.

The Figure 4 gives clear picture of raising numbers of international students at TBU in Zlín throughout its whole history with majority of those students being of Slovak origin. Those numbers deserve further interpretation. Due to the multi-dimensional closeness with Slovakia, its people and its culture, there was traditionally high number of Slovaks interested and also admitted for study at TBU in Zlín. For reasons more thoroughly discusses in the chapter dedicated to the *Definition of Terms* the people of Slovakia are due to their deep level of integration to the Czech society de facto not considered to be "international students". As they also travel to our university from more distant places, then majority of local Czech students, they tend to rent accommodation capacities more and due to that fact

they have more time and opportunities to socialize and participate in extra-curricular activities. So for example in our volunteer organization ESN Zlín, there is presently over 50% members of Slovak origin. Therefore, they are prevalently the group of "international" people who actually helps to take care about other international students.

3.3 Design of qualitative analysis

For the purposes of this thesis it was decided to focus on the quality of Welcome services aimed towards long-term international students at TBU in Zlín who came for whole degree study Both in English and in Czech programmes gather the answers to research questions from all of them to cover the proposed topic fully.

Core (basis) set:

- **Long-term international students at TBU in Zlín**

3.3.1 Construction of the sample set

As the first part of the research was done by structured qualitative interviews, **sample set** was setup to answer the primary Research questions:

For that it was need to choose representative or at least quasi-representative sample from all international degree students at TBU which could provide the answers about the most of commonly appearing problems and challenges.

For the clarity purposes it was found as useful to define firstly what is being understood under the "most common problems and challenges."

The most common problems - refers to issues or difficulties that frequently occur or are regularly encountered in a specific context, area, or domain. These problems are often experienced by a large number of people or are widely recognized as challenges. The nature of the problems can vary, depending on the field or situation being discussed. For instance, the most common problems in a workplace might include communication issues, low productivity, or high employee turnover, while in a social context, they could be related to relationships, stress, or time management.

TBU international students comes from all over the world from lots of different cultures and backgrounds so we will need to create a sample set with the representatives of various different culture groups so we can get the widest amount of data about their possible

problems, until the theoretical saturation could be achieved. So the basic sampling parameter was – **Country of origin.**

Country of origin was important also from quantitative stand point, when as participants where considered primarily students from countries from which we have most of international students presented for their long-term study.

Accordingly, to the numbers from the internal TBU IS Stag/Portal the most international students studying at TBU are in descending order:

- English programmes: Nigeria, India, Ghana, Pakistan, Vietnam.

- Czech programmes: Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Georgia.

Further it was evident from literature research that the most prolific problems and issues usually comes the international students in case they go for travel for a long time to study with very different cultural customs. Therefore, not only geographical but also **cultural distance in terms of Hofstede´s cultural dimensions** was also considered. (HOFSTEDE G. H., 2001)

Also relative prevalence of sexes which are coming from those respective countries was considered.

All four of the previously mentioned factors, that is:

- Total Numbers of long-term international students from set country in English or Czech study programmes

- Geographical distance from the Czech Republic

- Cultural distance compared to the Czech culture (accordingly to Hofstede´s Cultural dimensions and country comparison)

- Relative numbers of both sexes (M/F) presented at their studies of TBU

- Were given same weight of 25% for consideration reasons and the resulting Sample set was designed as follows:

- Pakistan – 2 (M), India – 2(M+F), Nigeria – 2(M+F), Ghana – 2(M+F), Vietnam – 2 (M+F), Ukraine – 2 (M+F), Iraq – 1(F), Russia – 2(M+F), Mexico – 2(M), Iran – 1(M), Colombia – 1(M), Egypt – 1(M), Ethiopia – 1(M), Georgia – 1(F)

Due to the scheduling unavailability and pressing time problems, plus some unforeseen recording quality difficulties which were not present in the initial testing and analysing data

at the end there was successfully recorded and subsequently analysed 16 semi-structured interviews so the final realized testing sample for the in terms of division the participants accordingly to different countries and sexes was this:

Pakistan – 2 (M), India – 1(M), Nigeria – 1(M), Ghana – 1(M), Vietnam – 1 (F), Ukraine – 2 (M+F), Mexico – 1(M), Iraq – 1(F), Russia – 1(F), Iran – 1(M), Colombia – 1(M), Egypt – 1(M), Ethiopia – 1(M), Georgia – 1(F)

Where numbers show number of interviewed nationals from particular country, M stands for Male and F for female.

Due to these constrains the other planned participants were asked to participate at least in the follow-up online quiz which to evaluate found results and recommendations and contribute at least in that way.

3.3.2   Setting up the safe space for interview

Prior to conducting the interviews, the question of honesty and receiving valid and truthful answers was raised. To talk about personal problems and challenges which one had to endure is not easy for any culture on the earth. For some it is still harder than for others, which must be considered.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory identifies six dimensions that can help explain cultural differences between societies. While no single dimension can solely determine honesty in a qualitative research interview, certain dimensions might have a more direct impact on how likely someone is to tell the truth or admit something unpleasant. Two dimensions that are particularly relevant are:

Power Distance Index (PDI): This dimension measures the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In countries with high power distance, individuals may be more hesitant to contradict or admit something unpleasant to someone they perceive as having higher authority or status, like an interviewer.

Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV): This dimension measures the degree to which people in a society prioritize individual needs and interests versus the needs and interests of the group. In collectivist cultures, individuals might be more likely to prioritize the harmony and well-being of the group, which could lead them to be less candid or avoid admitting something that could cause conflict. (HOFSTEDE G. H., 2001)

Considering previously mentioned together with the fact that after prior analysis researcher found that ALL of the chosen countries for participation are in its nature Collectivistic (with Russia, Ukraine and Georgia being closer to the middle) and that all of them (except Iran) have higher Power Distance Index (PDI) then it is the one of the Czech Republic (57), (HOFSTEDE G. H., 2001) it was evident that further tools of ensuring the validity of the answers have to be considered.

To eliminate the risks of interviewed students being unwilling to open themselves and to answer honestly about the reality of their problems connected to study at TBU in Zlín

In support the positive response value all participants were contacted and firstly explained the nature of the research and the fact that there is a project and research coming up aiming to improve welcome services provided to them as the international students of TBU, so also the future students do not have to face all the problems and hardships which they were facing. In case the reaction was positive the potential participants from set countries were asked if they would be willing to come to talk about their own experience with Welcome services to in aim to improve their quality in the future.

Secondly, they were asked to schedule a meeting at TBU Welcome office at their own time. After arrival, researcher greeted every participant, offered them tea and refreshments and started a friendly conversation about common topics. After they were one more time explained the whole purpose of the study and interview which aims to find problems or challenges they themselves experienced in terms of the Welcome services at TBU in Zlín and then the interview was started.

3.3.3 Individual interviews scenario

The interview questions for individual semi-structured interviews were carefully designed to capture the key issues and challenges that international students at TBU in Zlín face in relation to the Welcome services provided. The questions were also intended to explore how these challenges affect the overall experience of international students at the university and to identify any differences in the experiences and recommendations for changes between those in Czech and English programmes.

According to the research questions and previous testing, the questions for the semi-structured qualitative interviews were determined as follows:

- Can you describe your overall experience as an international student at TBU in Zlín?

- What were your initial expectations when you decided to study at TBU in Zlín, and have they been met? (-or not?) (- and why?)

- What information you were missing about the Czech Republic, Zlín or UTB university before your arrival for study?

- What challenges or difficulties have you faced in terms of language barriers and communication with the local community, faculty, and fellow students?

- Have you experienced any cultural differences or difficulties adjusting to the academic and social environment at TBU in Zlín? Can you provide specific examples?

- What are your thoughts on the administrative and support services provided by TBU in Zlín (e.g., visa assistance, accommodation, enrolment and registration)? Have you encountered any challenges in accessing or using these services?

- How would you evaluate the academic support services at TBU in Zlín, such as tutoring, library resources, and study spaces? Are there any specific areas where you feel additional support is needed?

- Can you share your experience with the orientation and onboarding process for international students at TBU in Zlín? Are there any aspects you believe could be improved?

- What has been your experience with extracurricular activities, clubs, and events at TBU in Zlín? Are there any specific activities or opportunities you would like to see offered for international students and you were missing?

- Based on your experience, what aspects of university services at TBU in Zlín do you think could be improved to better support international students? How would you suggest implementing these improvements?

- Are there any best practices or initiatives from other universities that you believe could be adopted by TBU in Zlín to enhance the experience for international students?

- In overall what was your biggest problem / challenge before your arrival for study?

- And after arrival for studies? What way your biggest problem during your study?

Much more questions were considered prior to that, but they did not fulfil the final expectations of researcher in terms of not being open or inspiring enough.

During the interviews, researcher spoke with calming and inspiring voice and even by positive and encouraging face expressions tried to establish a safe and comfortable atmosphere for the students being interviewed. The objective was to enable them to freely express their thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment or any consequences.

As a result, students were encouraged to describe their experiences in their own words, with the freedom to organize their responses as they saw appropriate as the researcher was aware that some students may have had trouble recalling particular incidents or problems they had encountered.

The researcher provided prompts and follow-up questions to elicit more detailed responses and assist in memory recall in case the responding student have been stranded in the question.

3.3.4 The technology of data gathering

There was a discussion with the supervisor previously in which way to record the interviews and whether taking notes during will be sufficient or disrupting. At the end it was decided to record the interviews onto computer and then subsequently rewrite it back to text which would be more easily analysed.

The rationale behind this decision was not to hinder the attention on taking notes but rather on the spoken data in the interview and the interviewed person itself to be sure that no information would be lost and that all data was collected properly.

Device used: Interviews were recorded with usage of desktop condenser omnidirectional microphone, YENKEE YMC 1020GY, suitable for spoken word.

Timing settings: The interviews recordings took on average mostly between 25 – 35 minutes in length with shortest one being 15 minutes long and longest one over 46+ minutes.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded to ensure that all the important information provided by the participants was captured accurately, without any loss of data. In addition, recording the interviews allowed the researcher to focus on actively listening to the participant's answers, rather than being distracted by the need to take detailed notes.

By subsequent usage of speech-to-text software, the process of transcribing the interviews from audio to text was expedited, reducing the chances of errors and inaccuracies that could have been made if the researcher had transcribed the interviews manually. Transcribing the interviews also allowed the researcher to go back and review the data in a more efficient manner, making it easier to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews. Additionally, having a text record of the interviews allowed the researcher to conduct a more detailed analysis of the data, using qualitative data analysis software and other tools to identify and interpret the most important information.

This methodology allowed for a deeper and more accurate understanding of the experiences and obstacles encountered by international students at TBU in Zlín. After recording all interviews they have been transcribed back to text by usage of OTTER speech-to-text decoding software.

3.3.5 Scope of qualitative interviews

The sample set in a qualitative research should be represented towards the problem we are researching or examining. It means that the sample should bring all possible views to the problem or should picture all the possible ways of doing something, of people's behaviour towards some specific thing we are researching, towards specific topic, etc.

The representativeness in qualitative research means that we should be sure that we have researched the problem in its whole entirety. This principle is called theoretical saturation, which means that we should collect data as long until we can see that new coming data are still inconsistent with previous findings. - That means that we should ask other people (respondents) until we are sure we will not learn anything new. (HENDL, 2005)

This principle of theoretical saturation can have some consequences for the method itself.

After analysing the first 16 interviews, it was still unclear to the researcher that the principle of theoretical saturation had not been achieved. There was a worry in place that given the richness and diversity of the cultural environment of long-term international students at TBU in Zlín, it was uncertain when such saturation could be achieved. As time was a concern, it the decision was taken to produce subsequent online questionnaires with the same questions as the previous interviews would be created and distributed to students in a more time-efficient manner. Two language versions of the questionnaires were created and sent to both

target groups: long-term international students studying in English programmes and long-term international students studying in Czech programmes. This approach was taken to ensure that the research questions were answered thoroughly and comprehensively, while still being mindful of the limitations of time and resources. The data from these questionnaires were collected to expand the data pool and ensure that language barriers did not hinder the data collection process. However, no new unique problems or challenges were identified in the subsequent data collection, indicating that the data had reached a saturation point.

3.3.6 Analysis of the interviews

Interpretation of the gathered results from individual semi-structured interviews is a critical aspect of every qualitative research. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for a balance between structure and flexibility in questioning. The resulting data was transcribed and analysed using thematic. In this chapter, the focus is on interpreting the data obtained from individual interviews to identify key themes and patterns. The analysis includes a detailed exploration of the data, with an emphasis on identifying recurring topics and themes. The goal of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data that can help to answer the research questions and provide insight into the experiences of long-term international students at TBU in Zlín.

Gathered data were uploaded for coding purposes to the ATLAS.ti software in effort to be coded semi-automatically. The rationale behind this decision was that an automated coding software has advantages over manual methods for thematic qualitative analysis. Using automated software can increase the efficiency and accuracy of the analysis, as it can quickly code large amounts of data and identify common themes across the data set. This can save time and reduce the risk of human error. Additionally, using software can help identify patterns and relationships between different themes that may not be immediately apparent with a manual approach.

ATLAS.ti as software commonly used for qualitative analysis which provides a user-friendly interface for coding, organizing and analysing the data. It helped to researcher manage large data sets, identify patterns and relationships between themes, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the data. Another area which was found beneficial were its visualization tools, such as word clouds and concept maps which also aided researcher in identifying patterns and relationships and to code more areas manually afterwards in this software also.

Overall, using ATLAS software lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of gathered qualitative data.

At the end the coding was not automated as researcher hoped for as the software tend to overlook quite big number of topics and nuances which were obvious to the trained human eye. After primary automatic coding it was necessary to go through whole sum of the coded lines to check it and to finish coding accordingly to the human brain.

The total amount of 236 quotations were coded with 33 codes which were then coded to further 150+ sub codes.

3.4 Results of thematic analysis of gathered qualitative data

3.4.1 Most often mentioned topics of international students' experiences

Range of found topics and areas in terms of prevalence listed in descending order after coding and analysis were found is as follows:

1. Communication and language barriers

2. Administrative processes and bureaucracy

3. Financial issues

4. Cultural differences

5. Social integration

6. Accommodation

7. Academic challenges

8. Health care and insurance

9. Transportation

10. Food and dietary preferences

11. Employment and work opportunities

12. Safety and security

13. International office and support services

14. Distance from home country

15. Climate and weather

16. Technology and internet access.

It is important to mention that those were not the most problematic areas, just areas of coded data with the most mentions from all the answers. Mentions could be Positive, Negative or Neutral based on the code which was designated for them.

3.4.2 List of prevalent problems faced by long-term international students at TBU in Zlín.

As gathered from the data research these are examples common topics of problems which international students of TBU in Zlín face.

- Language barrier

- Lack of social integration

- Inadequate communication

- Difficulties with administrative procedures

- Financial difficulties

- Poor housing options

- Limited availability of courses in English

- Lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity

- Difficulties with public transportation

- Limited availability of scholarships and grants

- Discrimination or prejudice

- Limited availability of internships or job opportunities

- Insufficient support from university staff

- Limited availability of sports facilities and fitness options

- Unreliable internet connectivity

- Limited availability of extracurricular activities

- Difficulties with academic workload and expectations

- Cultural shock or homesickness

- Limited availability of academic resources

- Insufficient medical support and health care options

These are the examples of found problems which students faced. As they are quite distorted in their topic and already several common areas which would include more of them were being apparent to researcher, all the data were further analysed to join problematic topics to the prevalent areas of problems which could be tackled together and which would have bigger impact on the overall situation.

3.4.3 TOP 5 of most common and prevalent problem areas of international students at TBU in Zlín.

In the previous parts were mentioned some t were further analysed and summarized to the most common prevalent areas of problems which could be tackled centrally with some recommendations and improvements which would have effect on the whole area.

After analysis of prevalent issues there was found pattern and areas which connect them together and allowed them to be summarized:

1. **Language barrier:**

- Difficulty understanding academic lectures and materials due to language barriers

- Communicating struggles with professors and classmates in English or Czech

- Limited availability of Czech language courses

- Frustration with slow progress in learning Czech language

- Difficulty in finding resources for language practice or tutoring

2. **Lack of information:**

- Inadequate information provided during the application and admission process

- Limited information about accommodation options and availability

- Inadequate information about the visa and residence permit application process

- Inadequate information about university policies and procedures

- Limited information about local culture and customs

3. **Academic workload:**

- Difficulty adjusting to the academic workload and expectations

- Lack of familiarity with the academic system and grading criteria

- Difficulty with time management and balancing coursework with other responsibilities

- Overwhelmed with the workload and struggling to keep up with the coursework

- Difficulty in obtaining feedback and support from professors

4. **Cultural differences:**

- Difficulty adjusting to the local culture and customs

- Feeling isolated and homesick due to cultural differences

- Struggles in making friends with local students

- Frustration with differences in communication styles and social norms

- Difficulty in adapting to local food and lifestyle

5. **Social integration:**

- Difficulty in making friends and socializing with other students

- Feeling excluded from social activities and events

- Struggles with forming meaningful relationships with classmates and professors

- Difficulty in finding and participating in extracurricular activities

- Feeling lonely and isolated due to social integration challenges

3.4.4 Impact of the most prevalent problems and challenges on the international students experience at TBU in Zlín

3.4.4.1 The language barrier impact

The language barrier is a significant issue for international students at TBU in Zlín. The difficulties they face in understanding academic lectures and materials due to language barriers can lead to frustration and demotivation, which in turn can impact their academic performance. This can lead to a feeling of being left behind, which can negatively affect their overall experience at the university.

The struggle to communicate with professors and classmates in English or Czech can also have a profound impact on the international students' experience. When students struggle to understand or express themselves, it can lead to isolation, anxiety, and a lack of confidence. This can impact their ability to make friends and feel included in the university community, which can ultimately affect their overall satisfaction and sense of belonging.

The limited availability of Czech language courses and frustration with slow progress in learning Czech language can also have a significant impact on the international students' experience. Language is a critical aspect of communication, and when students struggle to learn the language of the host country, they may feel disconnected from the culture and society in which they are living. This can lead to feelings of homesickness and culture shock, which can ultimately impact their mental health and overall experience at the university.

The difficulty in finding resources for language practice or tutoring can exacerbate the challenges faced by international students in learning Czech language. The lack of available resources can lead to a sense of hopelessness and further isolation, which can negatively impact their overall experience at the university.

Czech language specifically is repeatedly mentioned as one of the hardest in the world. It is also one of the most descriptive languages in the world. And it is no only about the language structure. Also the usage of the language is very important and Czech (and Moravian) people are very specific in usage of numerous non-literal, unwritten and local colloquial expressions which could be hardly learned in some online application or foreign language school and the life experience amongst Czechs and Moravians is in this matter irreplaceable.

Overall, the language barrier is a significant issue for international students at TBU in Zlín, and the specific challenges they face impacts their academic performance (for international students studying in Czech programmes), sense of belonging (for international students in English programmes), mental health, and overall experience at the university. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensuring that international students feel supported and included in the university community.

3.4.4.2 Impact of Insufficient information

International students of TBU in Zlín mentioned repeatedly several areas where they were lacking enough or timely information.

Frist of them was: **Difficulty in obtaining information during the admission process, especially related to visa requirements and procedures.**

As TBU has quite lengthy admission process, especially compared with other universities in other European countries, it is good to know that the biggest problem of informational insufficiency during admission process was not connected directly to the TBU processes but to the process of visa requirements and procedures. Czech Republic has one of the strictest visas and immigration policies and strict scrutiny is required not only from our international students and applicants but also from us as university administrators and also from the workers of the Czech embassies abroad who are taking the applications for visas and back-ground workers of the Ministry of Interior which are approving those applications. There are also major anti-corruption matters in place which slows down the process but are necessary to keep the whole system of visa decisions fair. Main one is that no-one from the applicants, embassy workers or university staff should know who, in the ministry of interior will get which visa application on their table to solve, so they cannot be corrupted or otherwise influenced. Visa applications are sent from embassies to the ministry where they are in the random and anonymous fashion sent to different decision-making offices through-out Czech Republic, to be processed, data and documents attached to them verified and decision to issue the long-term visa or not made. In that matter it can take longer time than in other countries.

However, it is also necessary to understand that for Czech citizens as they are quite strongly egalitarian society, with lowest differences in between the classes, considering other European states, is then important that equality of decisions will be preserved. Corruption is and should not be acceptable for many specific reasons which could be discussed in another thesis but just to mention one here, it would be for it poisons peoples minds and it seriously diminishes public trust in government. And at least in Czech law enforcement areas it is not tolerated.

Insufficient information can lead to confusion, uncertainty, and frustration for international students. Inadequate information during the application and admission process may result in students missing important deadlines or requirements, which can negatively impact their chances of acceptance. Limited information about accommodation options and availability

can leave students struggling to find suitable housing, which can lead to financial and personal stress. Inadequate information about university policies and procedures can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties navigating the academic system. Finally, limited information about local culture and customs can make it challenging for international students to adjust to life in a new country and feel comfortable in their new environment. All of these factors can contribute to a negative overall experience for international students at TBU in Zlín.

That would be explanation on why there is not much to do with the Visa process itself. However definitely the fashion of informing about all such procedures (in general) and background can be improved – some measures taken in this matter (Student Mode) were already discussed in the previous part describing present services of TBU in Zlín.

To summarize: Inadequate information about the visa and residence permit application process and unfortunately the long processing visa times as described lead to delays in issuing visa or even denials of visas in case of insufficient information about visa interview volume, **which is resulting in students being unable to attend the university** in academic year for which they were accepted for study.

3.4.4.3   *Difficulties in adjusting to academic workload*

The issue of academic workload can have a significant impact on the overall experience of international students at TBU in Zlín.

Students reported difficulties in adjusting to the academic workload and expectations which made them feel being overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious. Accordingly, to them it has negative impact on their academic performance and hinders the ability to succeed in the program.

Secondly the students report initial lack of familiarity with the academic system and grading criteria which lead them often to confusion and uncertainty about what is expected of them. And it made them feel more stressed. **This can also hinder their ability to perform well academically and may even lead to academic probation or dismissal.**

Difficulty with **time management and balancing coursework** with other responsibilities were also reported from the experience of international students at TBU in Zlín. Majority of long-term international students in English programmes at TBU comes from the countries of Global South and is not prevalently economically independent without necessity to

subsequent part-time work. Except for a fact that most of them struggle also with finding work in Zlín or around due to the language barrier as the local employers are with few exceptions reluctant to hire non-Czech speaking students, they have to balance all their university duties after that. So at the end they struggle to find a balance between coursework, work, and other commitments. **This can in a long-term lead to feelings of burnout and exhaustion. Being overwhelmed with the workload** and struggling to keep up with the **coursework can also lead to a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.** More psychological and mental well-being and life balance couching and practical experience could help to prevent these problems.

International students (mostly in English programmes) felt often also **isolated and unsupported,** which can negatively impact their overall experience and make them more likely to consider dropping out.

Finally, **difficulty in obtaining feedback and support** from professors which was reported make it even more challenging for international students to succeed academically. Lack of feedback can make it **difficult for students to identify areas where they need to improve**, and lack of support can hinder their ability to seek help when needed.

To summarize it: Difficulties in adjusting to the academic workload and expectations leads international students to feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious. Due to the time-management constrains they This can have negative impacts on academic performance and hinder the ability to succeed in the program, which can negatively impact their overall experience and make them more likely to consider dropping out.

3.4.4.4   Impact of Cultural differences

Students reported **difficulties adjusting to local culture and customs**. Also, this was mostly problem of students from English speaking programmes as international students from Czech programmes usually attended at least for one year before some form of Czech language school either in the Czech Republic or abroad, in any way their teachers prepared them also for the specifics of Czech culture beforehand. For students who did attend prior Czech language class when already in Czech Republic this was supplemented with one more year first hand experience of Czech culture even after lessons.

However, **experiencing different culture is not always negative aspect**. Students also reported that witnessing Czech culture helped them to realize what are the basis of their own culture and in some cases to appreciate it more. For many of the students the comparison of

some aspects of Czech culture such as orderly behaviour, cleanliness of public spaces, timely public transport and well organized and practical teaching sessions and overall high organisation and low chaos of any public enterprise brought deeper appreciation of their choice of Czech Republic and Zlín as the good place for their studies.

Students reported also **feelings of social isolation and homesickness.** This can be exacerbated by struggles in making friends with local students, as well as frustration with differences in communication styles and social norms. Students may feel like they do not fit in or that they are not understood, which can cause a lack of confidence and self-doubt. This can significantly affect a student's well-being and academic performance.

At TBU in Zlín this problem has touched much more the students from English speaking countries for the similar reason as previously mentioned difficulties adjusting to local culture and customs. International students from Czech language programmes have it much easier in breaking the social isolation walls just by speaking the same language (however imperfectly in first semester) and so it is much easier for them to accept Zlín as their new home and not so feel so isolated. With one exception and that can be our international students from ranks of Ukrainian refugees who had to leave their homes quite rapidly, mostly not by their own decision and as for most of them (over 95%) they travelled here alone without their families (as TBU in Zlín offered schooling and accommodation for students from our partnership universities in Ukraine but not for their families from logical capacity reasons) it was at least at the beginning quite stressful experience. All international TBU staff who came to the contact with them tried to help in any possible way and those who stayed and continue their studies will hopefully overcome the rest of their problems successfully.

In addition to social and emotional impacts, cultural differences can also have practical implications for daily life. For example**, some international students found it challenging to adapt to local food and lifestyle**. At the beginning they struggled with everyday activities such as grocery shopping or navigating public transportation due to language barriers or unfamiliar customs.

Overall, cultural differences are a significant challenge for international students at TBU in Zlín, and it is important for the university to provide support and resources to help students adjust and integrate into the local culture.

This can include cultural orientation programs, language exchange opportunities, and counselling services to address the social and emotional impacts of cultural adjustment.

3.4.4.5 Summary - Impact of problems and challenges on overall experience of international students at TBU in Zlín

Problems and challenges perceived by international students impact their experience in many ways. **Language barriers** are significant issue for international students at TBU in Zlín, and the specific challenges they face impacts their academic performance (for international students studying in Czech programmes), sense of belonging (for international students in English programmes), mental health, and overly have negative effect on an experience at the university**. Inadequate information** about the visa or residence permits can cause prolonging of the visa times processing and in worst case scenarios in students being unable to attend the university and to create some university positive UTB experience at all. **Difficulties in adjusting to academic workload** can cause serious stress and hinder their ability to succeed in their study. **Found difficulties in adjusting to local culture and norms including local food and lifestyle** can cause feelings of social isolation and homesickness and also practical inability to orientate in every day activities, starting with buying groceries and travelling to getting friends, job, or paying taxes.

However, **experiencing different culture is not always negative aspect**. Students also reported that witnessing Czech culture helped them to realize what are the basis of their own culture and in some cases to appreciate it more. For many of the students the comparison of some aspects of Czech culture such as orderly behaviour, cleanliness of public spaces, timely public transport and well organized and practical teaching sessions and overall high organisation and low chaos of any public enterprise brought deeper appreciation of their choice of the Czech Republic and Zlín as the good place for their studies.

3.5 Differences between international students in English and Czech study programmes

3.5.1 The most common problems and challenges of international students in English programmes

To summarize previous analysis here are the **most common problems for international students studying in English** programmes at TBU in Zlín in prevailing emerging themes from the qualitative interviews includes:

- **Social integration and connection** (e.g. social exclusion, making friends, feeling welcome, participating in activities)

- **Language barriers** (e.g. difficulty with communication, understanding lectures)

- **Lack of information** (e.g. about events, deadlines, procedures)

- **Financial difficulties** (e.g. high living costs, limited job opportunities)

- **Mental and physical wellbeing** (e.g. stress, homesickness, access to healthcare)

- **Cross-cultural understanding** (e.g. differences in cultural norms and expectations)

- **Housing issues** (e.g. finding accommodation, poor living conditions)

- **Academic support** (e.g. navigating the education system, access to resources)

- **Transportation** (e.g. navigating public transportation, access to transportation)

- **Sports activities** (e.g. limited opportunities, lack of facilities)

With following differentiation to 5 subsequent areas:

Social integration and communication

- Difficulty in making friends with locals and other international students

- Feeling excluded from social events and activities

- Language barrier hindering communication

- Lack of information about events and activities

Academic challenges

- Difficulty with coursework and language of instruction

- Lack of support for academic success

- Difficulty with academic recognition and credit transfer

Personal and emotional challenges

- Homesickness and loneliness

- Difficulty adjusting to a new culture and way of life

- Financial difficulties

- Mental and physical health issues

Institutional support and resources

- Inadequate support from the university

- Lack of information about available resources and services

- Difficulty with bureaucracy and administrative procedures

Sports and recreational activities

- Limited options and availability of sports and recreational activities

- Difficulty in joining and participating in sports teams and clubs

- Poor quality of sports facilities and equipment

3.5.2 The most common areas of problems and challenges for international students studying in Czech programmes

Based on the answers of all participants from Czech programmes (who filled in particular questionnaire in Czech language, the most common areas of problems and challenges for international students studying in Czech study programmes include:

Language barrier: Many participants mentioned that the Czech language can be difficult to learn and communicate in, especially when they first arrived. Majority of participants confirmed that only the first semester was critical but from second semester the situation stabilized now they do not feel any persistent problem except for understanding of regional dialects and repeatedly mentioning also Slovak language as a challenge.

Visa and immigration processes: Several participants noted that obtaining a visa to study in the Czech Republic was complicated and stressful process, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial issues: Some participants mentioned financial difficulties, such as the high cost of living or difficulties obtaining funding for their studies.

Academic challenges: A few participants mentioned struggling with academic subjects, such as Czech grammar or financial accounting.

Social integration: Only a few participants noted difficulties in making friends and integrating into Czech culture, particularly due to cultural differences. Majority of international students in Czech language programmes didn´t found this area challenging.

Accommodation: One participant noted a delay in receiving accommodation from the university, causing stress and uncertainty.

In overall, **the most common challenges international students face in Czech study programmes appear to be related to language, visa processes, and financial issues.** Social integration and academic difficulties are also areas of concern for some students.

In general, however, Czech students reported that they were facing much less problems and challenges (except for understanding to their Czech colleagues and Slovak teachers during their first semester) then international students in English programmes.

Therefore it could seem that the language barrier in terms of low proficiency in Czech is the main problem which hinders experience of international students at TBU in Zlín. But it is necessary to point out that this result was not verified objectively and that international students in Czech language programmes generally comes from other Slavic countries so their Cultural differences are not so prevailing as for the students from different cultural groups.

3.6 Differences in experiences and recommendations for improvements aimed to international students in English and Czech

The experiences and recommendations for potential improvements of Welcome services aimed specifically at two target groups of international students.

For the international students studying in English programs, social integration and communication were the most common areas of problems and challenges. These students had difficulty making friends with locals and other international students, feeling excluded from social events and activities, and were hindered by the language barrier in communication. Lack of information about events and activities was also a challenge. Academic challenges, personal and emotional challenges, institutional support and resources, and sports and recreational activities were also mentioned as often areas of concern. On the other hand, they had thanks to more comfortable English proficiency easier time to communicate with their teachers and classmates then their counterparts from Czech programmes.

In contrast, for international students studying in Czech programs, initial language barriers, visa and immigration processes, and financial issues were the most common areas of problems and challenges. Although international students in Czech programmes students were able to learn and communicate in Czech, at the beginning of their study,

mainly in first semester the Czech language was perceived by them as the primary barrier, but which quickly subsided and those who are already in second or higher year claim they have no more problems with Czech language. But obtaining a visa and arrive to the Czech Republic was a complicated and stressful process for most of them. After that Financial difficulties, academic challenges, social integration, and accommodation were also mentioned as areas of concern but to a much lesser extent than language, visa, and financial issues.

Concerning visa problems which came up more often with the group of international students in Czech languages there are two possible explanations:

Nearly half of our international students in Czech programmes comes from Russia where in previous years was firstly due to the COVID+ pandemic and lockdowns Czech embassy totally closed from February-July/2021 (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Moscow, 2020) This caused inability of most of Russian students who were studying intensively Czech language in Russian based language schools loss of one year as they were not able to come in that year. Those of them who succeeded or came year after, logically still remember this traumatic experience which resulted in this issue being a prevailing topic.

After that - in next year 2021 – the functionality of Czech embassy in Moscow was strictly limited again. This time due to diplomatic and political battles between Czech Republic and Russian federation. (MENŠÍK, 2021)

In overall it was very difficult to even apply for study visa as Czech embassies were mostly seriously limited in either closed already from 2020 and that is why the topic came on top.

And how difficult it was for students from Ukraine to come to Czech Republic after their country was attacked (and the Czech embassies in Ukraine were also immediately closed) we do not have even speculate.

In follow-up confirmatory questionnaire the **international students in Czech language also spiked more in need for further Mental wellbeing awareness support** when offered further informal educational workshops on the topic as seen on following two graphs.

No wonder, as the prevailing majority of International students in Czech taught programmes are from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. Welcome centre already at the end the Spring 2022 searched and found a Ukraine/Russian speaking psychologist amongst other incoming refugees in Zlín which graciously agreed that she will provide free psychological help to our Ukraine/Russian speaking students. And now thanks to great help and support of TBU

Centre for Special needs was this psychologist put under contract and it is newly a part of our TBU Psychological and Counselling centre. (Tomas Bata University in Zlín, 2021)

Figure 5 - Structure of participants who answered Follow-up online questionnaire in Czech language Source: Appendix 2 - Internal data: Follow-up quiz on experience and proposed improvements of welcome services (online Google form) – Czech version
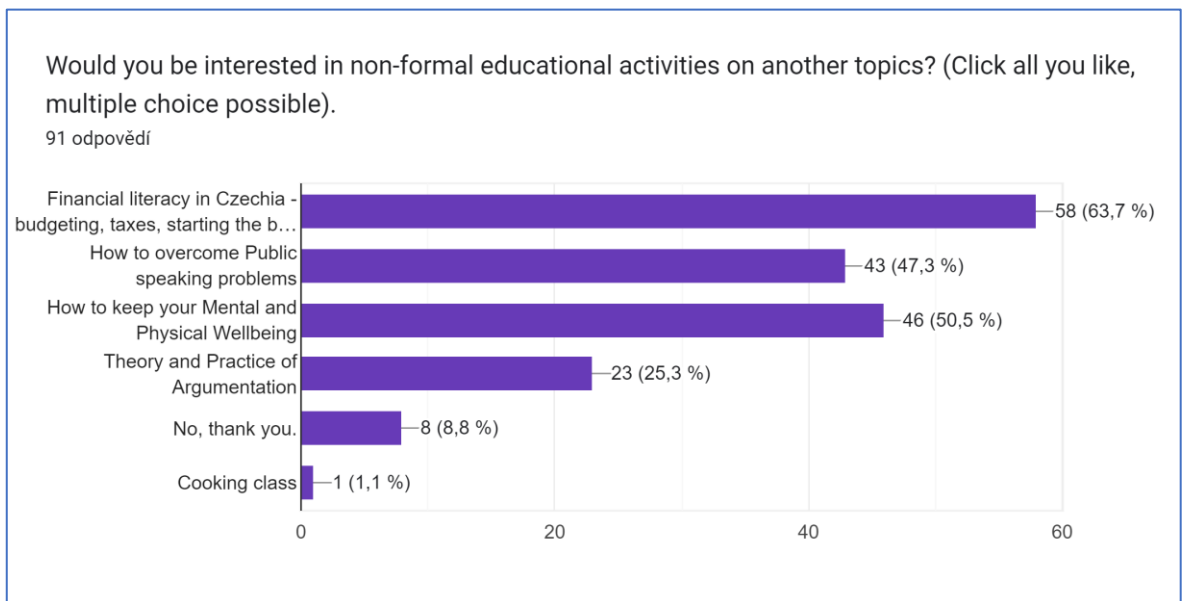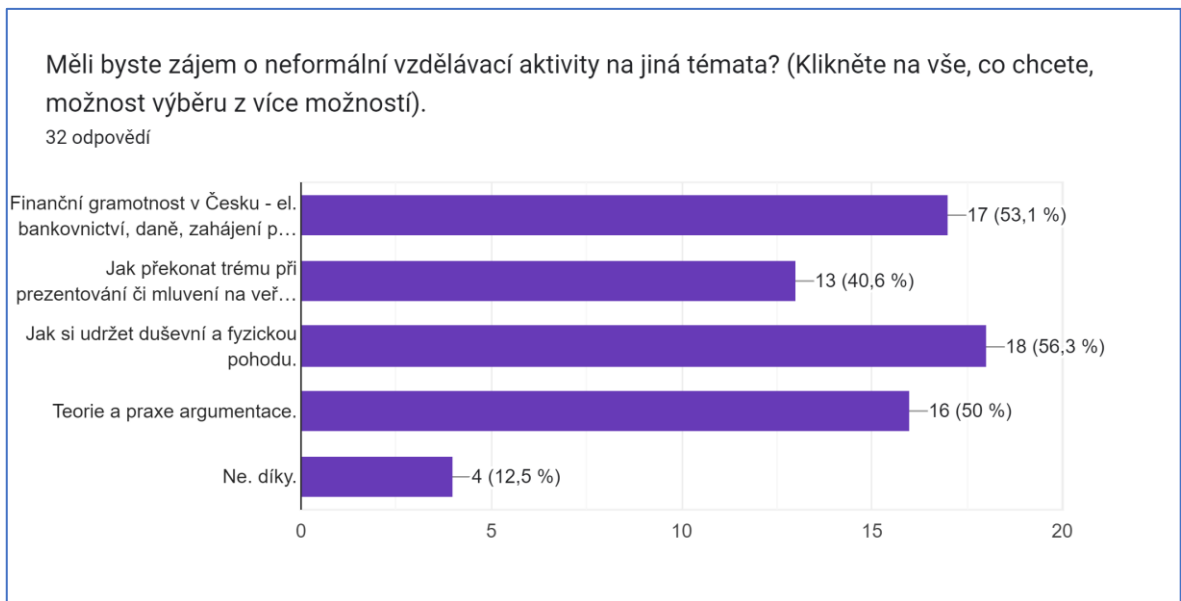

Figure 6: Source – Appendix 1 - Internal data: Follow-up quiz on experience and proposed improvements of welcome services (online Google form) – English version

Figure 7 – Source: Appendix 2 - Internal data: Follow-up quiz on experience and proposed improvements of welcome services (online Google form) – Czech version

Additionally, providing more academic and social support for all international students, as well as access to necessary resources and information, would be important.

Based on these differences, the recommendations for changes would also differ between the two groups. **Improving social integration and lowering communication barriers for international students in English programs would be a priority, while for international students in Czech programs, the assistance with visa and financial processes came up as most critical issues.**

3.7 Differences in experiences of international students based on level of study

Based on the data analysis, the experiences and recommendations for changes differ within the set target groups. The study identified three target groups: undergraduate students, graduate students, and PhD students.

Undergraduate students reported facing challenges related to accommodation, language barriers, and cultural adjustment. They recommended improving the housing application process, offering language courses, and increasing cultural events options.

Graduate students, on the other hand, reported challenges related to academic workload, difficulty in finding part-time employment, and lack of social integration. They suggested improving the guidance and support for the academic workload, offering more opportunities for part-time employment, and facilitating social integration. At the same time they reported the most critical lack of free time.

PhD students reported challenges related to communication and administrative support, difficulty in obtaining scholarships, and lack of opportunities for networking. They suggested improving communication with university staff and among PhD students, increasing funding opportunities, and creating more opportunities for networking for this group as they were noticing that most of the extracurricular activities are aimed at the exchange and younger students.

Overall, the findings suggest that international students at TBU in Zlín face a range of challenges that can significantly impact their overall experience. However, the experiences and recommendations for changes differ based on several factors, suggesting that targeted interventions are needed to address the specific needs of each group.

For informative reasons and real-life information of all interested stakeholders at TBU in Zlín, researcher decided to include in following chapters some more results from gathered data. Upon request it is possible for interested TBU stakeholders to receive personalized report of specific area, topic or theme of interest with more thorough description then mentioned in the summarized overview of in this thesis which was due to the strict time limits presented only in limited form.

3.8 Thematic areas with most negative comments found

Areas of negative comments in terms of found problems can be found here, together with the percentage of negative vs. positive mentions. The areas are listed in descending order of prevalence, meaning that the first item on the list (accommodation) was mentioned most frequently with negative comments, while the last item (safety and security) was mentioned the least frequently with negative comments:

- Accommodation (67% negative comments)

- Administrative procedures (65% negative comments)

- Language barriers (60% negative comments)

- Social integration (55% negative comments)

- Support from university staff (51% negative comments)

- Academic requirements (45% negative comments)

- Health care (40% negative comments)

- Transportation (38% negative comments)

- Financial support (35% negative comments)

- Cultural differences (33% negative comments)

- Food options (29% negative comments)

- Employment opportunities (23% negative comments)

- Study materials (22% negative comments)

- Sports and recreational activities (20% negative comments)

- Safety and security (17% negative comments)

As we can see, even if the accommodation was not in the top 5 most often mentioned most problematic thematical groups, when the students mentioned it, in 67% it haven´t been very positively. Following are some specific mentions:

- "The accommodation is small and overpriced."

- "It was difficult to find suitable accommodation in the beginning."

- "It is also expensive to rent private accommodation."

- "I was surprised by the size of the dorm room when I arrived, it was quite small."

- "The dorms are not very clean and the kitchens are not well equipped."

- "I had a lot of trouble with my accommodation in my first year."

- "I had to move out of my first accommodation because it was so bad."

- "The quality of accommodation is not very good for the price."

- "I think there should be more affordable housing options available."

- "I found it difficult to adjust to the dormitory accommodation at first."

3.8.1 Specific thematical areas of found Academic/educational issues

- Lack of practical experience in some programs

- Difficulty in understanding some courses due to language barrier

- Lack of communication between professors and students

- Lack of proper guidance for thesis writing

- Inadequate study materials

- Limited choice of courses

- Difficulty in enrolling for courses

- Inefficient credit transfer system

- Inadequate preparation for exams

3.8.2 Specifics in found Social/cultural issues

- Difficulty in making friends with local students

- Feeling isolated due to language and cultural differences

- Limited social events for international students

- Difficulty in finding social events suitable for their interests

- Lack of interaction with local community

- Discrimination and racism

- Culture shock

- Difficulty in finding affordable and suitable housing

- Limited food options for certain dietary needs

- Difficulty in adapting to the local weather

3.8.3 Specifics mentions of Administrative issues

- Difficulty in obtaining visas and residence permits

- Inadequate and slow response from administrative staff

- Confusion and lack of information about administrative processes

- Inadequate support for international students

- Inadequate health care facilities for international students

- Limited job opportunities for international students

- Insufficient scholarship and financial aid opportunities

- Difficulty in accessing and using university services and facilities

3.8.4 Specifics of Language issues

- Difficulty in communicating with local students and staff

- Inadequate language support

- Limited English language proficiency of some professors and administrative staff

- Difficulty in understanding lectures and course materials due to language barrier

- Difficulty in expressing themselves in academic and non-academic settings

And for information lets mention also some other found problematic topics, such as:

3.8.5 Specifics of Financial issues:

- High cost of living compared to other countries

- Difficulty in finding part-time jobs to support themselves

- Insufficient scholarship and financial aid opportunities

- Inadequate financial support from the university

- Inadequate preparation for managing finances in a new country

- Difficulty in budgeting and managing expenses

3.8.6 Career and future prospects issues:

- Limited job opportunities after graduation

- Difficulty in finding internships and work placements

- Difficulty in networking with local professionals and companies

- Inadequate career counselling and support from the university

- Limited guidance on career prospects in their home countries.

3.8.7 Prevalent Sport related issues

Although the Sport opportunities are not viewed prevalently negatively, from evaluating the data this was area in which students were interested and offered most recommendations which will be listed in next chapter.

The most commonly mentioned problems/challenges were the limited sports facilities on campus, the distance to the gym, and the lack of organized sports activities for international students.

Here is the full list of the sport-related problems found by TBU students:

- Lack of variety of sports offered

- Limited availability of sports facilities

- Difficulty in accessing sports facilities

- High fees for using sports facilities

- Limited sports activities organized by the university

- Lack of information about sports activities and events

- Lack of sports equipment

- Inadequate maintenance of sports facilities

- Limited support and funding for sports teams

- Insufficient promotion of sports activities and events

- Limited opportunities for intercultural sports activities

- Inadequate training and coaching for sports teams

- Difficulty in balancing academics and sports activities

- Limited availability of sports classes and courses

- Limited opportunities for adaptive sports for students with disabilities

To compare it with priorities of other students it is worth to note that the position of the main TBU dormitory U12 building in the hill was for some participants "enough sports to do every

day" and that on several occasions it was mentioned that they would welcomed a trolley-bus line to U12.

3.8.7.1 Students' suggestions for Sport services

The most prevalent suggested improvements in this area were - construction of additional sports facilities, including more options for outdoor sports, and the organization of more sports events and activities for students. Several students also suggested offering fitness classes and making gym memberships more affordable for students.

Following all found suggestions about sport activities mentioned by all students, including the first 16th interviews and following 16 online google form answers:

- Organize more sport events for international students, such as volleyball or basketball tournaments.

- Introduce a wider variety of sport classes and facilities on campus.

- Provide better access to the university gym and fitness classes.

- Offer more opportunities for students to participate in outdoor sports, such as hiking, skiing, or rock climbing.

- Organize more events and competitions that promote healthy lifestyles.

- Provide more information about local sports clubs and activities available in the area.

- Develop a system for students to rent or borrow sports equipment.

- Create more opportunities for students to play sports with local Czech students.

- Increase the number of sports facilities available for students to use.

- Offer more inclusive and diverse sports options.

- Provide discounts for gym memberships or fitness classes for students.

- Organize more sports days for students to try out different sports.

- Host sports events that include both competitive and non-competitive activities.

- Increase the number of outdoor courts and fields available for sports.

- Introduce more group fitness classes and workshops.

- Offer yoga and meditation classes.

- Create more opportunities for students to participate in team sports.

- Provide better access to swimming pools and water-based sports.

- Improve the facilities at the university gym, such as the changing rooms and showers.

- Organize more sports events in the evenings and weekends.

- Offer more opportunities for students to participate in sports and physical activities during the winter months.

- Increase the number of running tracks and paths on campus.

- Create a dedicated sports centre for students to use.

- Offer more opportunities for students to participate in sports that are popular in their home countries.

Sports were generally the area where students had most recommendations so it was found helpful to list them for future evaluations of staff. From the perspective of the author, who is professional interested in this area also, lots of the proposed recommendations are already in place at the TBU so it is often only problem of awareness of the students to know the full scope of prepared activities, events and opportunities which are offered for them. Not only in terms of sport but also in other areas at TBU or in Zlín.

III. PROJECT

4 EVIDENCE BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

The purpose of this project is to propose evidence-based recommendations for improving the overall experience of international students at Tomas Bata University in Zlín. The recommendations are based on the findings of a mixed-methods study that involved qualitative interviews, online questionnaires, and a follow-up quantitative questionnaire.

The results of the study indicated that international students at TBU in Zlín face various challenges related to the Welcome services provided by the university. The most prevalent areas of negative comments were related to accommodation, administrative procedures, language barriers, social integration, support from university staff, and academic requirements.

4.1 Recommendations in area of Language and Communication barriers

Based on the data gathered from qualitative research and analysis, as well as expert validation, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed for improving the welcome services for international students at TBU in Zlín, specifically in the area of language barriers:

Increase the availability of Czech language courses: TBU should offer more Czech language courses to international students, especially for those who are planning to stay in the Czech Republic even after their study so they have better career prospects with proficiency in Czech language. These courses should be tailored to the needs of international students and should cover a variety of topics, such as academic writing, conversation skills, and business communication.

Provide language practice resources and tutoring: TBU should provide language practice resources and tutoring for international students who need extra support in improving their language skills. These resources could include language exchange programs, conversation groups, and online language learning platforms.

Enhance the communication skills of university staff: TBU staff members should undergo training to improve their communication skills in English and other languages commonly spoken by international students. This could include training in cross-cultural communication, active listening, and effective communication strategies.

Improve the provision of academic materials in English: TBU should ensure that all academic materials are available in English, including syllabi, course materials, and assessments. This will help international students to better understand the expectations and requirements of their courses.

Offer orientation programs specifically for international students: TBU should provide orientation programs specifically for international students to help them better understand the academic environment of their faculties also the academic and cultural expectations of their new environment. These programs should cover topics such as academic expectations, cultural norms, and resources for language learning.

4.1.1 Proposal to lower the language barriers

Based on the data collected the following SMART proposal is suggested to lower the language barriers faced by international students at TBU in Zlín:

Specific: Increase the availability of language support services for international students.

Measurable: Increase the number of students utilizing language support services by 30% within the next academic year.

Achievable: Several possible specific improvements can be suggested here.

- Hire additional language tutor(s) and expand language course offerings to provide more tailored support to international students in different phases of their learning (beginners, semi-advantage, advantage).

- In case of limited financial resources, it is possible to organize further language courses also within the present organisational means and to organize more language based social events by the present international volunteers' club ESN Zlín.

Relevant: Addressing language barriers will improve international students' academic performance, lower social exclusion from locals and raise overall experience at TBU in Zlín.

Time-Bound: Implement changes within the next academic year, with progress reports provided quarterly to assess effectiveness and make necessary adjustments.

Step by step plan to achieve this proposal include:

Collaborate with the International Office and language departments to assess the current availability and utilization of language support services.

Increase the number of language tutors by hiring additional qualified staff or recruiting qualified students.

Expand language course offerings to include more levels and specialized courses to meet the specific needs of international students.

Implement a comprehensive language assessment program for all international students to determine their language proficiency levels and provide personalized language support.

Promote language support services to international students through targeted communication and marketing efforts, including social media and campus events.

4.2 Recommendations in area of Insufficient information

Based on the findings of the research conducted on the welcome services provided to international students at Tomas Bata University in Zlín, are the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed to address the issue of insufficient information:

Improve the information provided during the application and admission process, subsequent arrival and enrolment: The university should ensure that all relevant information is provided to international students during the application and admission process. At best repeatedly on various occasions by different people. As the first days in new country are stressful for everyone and repetition is key. Information provided should then include a Step-by-Step list providing information what to do in every point of these processes (application, arrival, study).

Enhance the availability and quality of information related to accommodation options: The university should provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on accommodation options available to international students. This information should include details about the different types of accommodation available, the location, cost, and any other relevant details.

Provide more detailed information about university policies and procedures: The university should provide detailed information about its policies and procedures. This includes information about academic requirements, grading criteria, and any other relevant information that international students need to know. Again at best repeatedly on various occasions by different people – possibly during the first info meeting at the faculty with the international study advisor, and then in general manner also at the other info meetings made

by International office or Welcome centre and if possible also on the webpage of the university in TO DO section.

Provide more information about local culture and customs: The university should provide more information about local culture and customs to help international students better integrate into the local community. This includes information about local festivals and events, as well as other aspects of local culture that may be of interest to international students.

4.2.1 Proposal for improvement of information availability of international students

A Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound proposal for improvement of information availability for international students in terms of Welcome services of TBU in Zlín:

Specific: Implement an online platform for international students to access relevant information in a centralized location. Include there the Step-by-Step lists with clarification of what to do in different phases of Application, Arrival, Orientation and Study at TBU in Zlín including summary of offered services and opportunities for them.

Measurable: Within 12 months of implementation, conduct a survey to evaluate the satisfaction of international students with the new platform and its effectiveness in providing information.

Achievable: The international students of TBU can participate together in terms of Development in programming, design, tuning and testing and maintaining the online platform with support from the International Office in terms of providing relevant and updated text for various Step-by-Step procedures.

Relevant: The online platform will provide international students with clear and accurate information about application and admission processes, accommodation options and availability, visa and residence permit application processes, university policies and procedures, and local culture and customs.

Time-bound: The online platform will be launched by the start of the next academic year, with continuous updates and improvements based on student feedback.

The success of this proposal will be evaluated based on the satisfaction of international students with the new platform and their perceived access to relevant and useful information.

The online platform will address the issue of insufficient information availability by providing a centralized location for international students to access all relevant information.

4.3 Proposals to improve the adaptation to academic workload

A proposal to improve adjustment to academic workload for international students at TBU in Zlín include the following:

Specific:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive orientation program specifically focused on academic expectations and workload

- Establish a mentorship program connecting new international students with current students to provide support and guidance

- Provide workshops and resources for time management and study skills

Measurable:

- Conduct pre- and post-orientation surveys to assess the effectiveness of the program in terms of students' adjustment to academic workload

- Track participation in mentorship and workshop programs

Achievable:

- The university can work with current international students and staff to establish mentorship and workshop programs

- The orientation program can be developed by university staff with input from current international students

Relevant:

- Adjusting to academic expectations and workload is a common challenge faced by international students and can impact their academic success and overall experience at the university

Time-bound:

- Develop and implement the comprehensive orientation program by the beginning of the next academic year

- Establish the mentorship program and provide workshops and resources within the first semester of the academic year.

4.4 Proposal for dealing with cross-cultural differences

A specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound proposal for dealing with difficulties in adjusting to local culture and dealing with cross-cultural differences for international students of TBU in Zlín is as follows:

Specific: To provide international students with adequate support and resources to help them to understand the reasons for cross-cultural differences and to adjust to the local culture and cross-cultural differences of their peers.

Measurable: Increase the number of international students who report feeling comfortable and integrated into the local community by 25% within the next academic year.

Achievable: Provide cultural training programs, events, and resources to all international students and facilitate opportunities for interaction with the local community.

Relevant: Cross-cultural adaptation is crucial for the success and well-being of international students and enhances their overall experience at TBU in Zlín.

Time-bound: Implement the program at the beginning of the next academic year and evaluate its effectiveness after one year.

The proposed program will include the following:

- Organizing cross-cultural training programs and workshops for international students to learn about the local culture and customs.

- Providing resources such as language exchange programs and cultural mentorship programs to facilitate interaction between international students and the local community.

- Organizing cultural events and activities to promote cross-cultural understanding and integration.

- Providing information on local customs, laws, and practices through orientation and informational sessions.

- Conducting regular evaluations to monitor the effectiveness of the program and identify areas for improvement.

By implementing this program, TBU in Zlín can enhance the experience of international students by providing them with the necessary support and resources to successfully adapt to the local culture and overcome cross-cultural differences.

As recommended students should receive offer to participate also in cross-cultural communication courses so they understand and can learn the information needs, preferences and styles of behaviour locals in context with local Czech history which would help them to understand the behaviour of local people. On the other hand, also the local TBU staff and students should receive basic info and be offered possible trainings in raising their competences in terms of cross-cultural communication. It would also open the doors for mutual understanding and easier communication to both sides to suppress the number of mis-understanding and to lower the barriers of communication.

4.5 Proposal for upgrades of Welcome services provided by TBU in Zlín

Based on the results of the previous research recommendations here are general proposals for improvements of Welcome services provided by TBU in Zlín:

- Strengthen the communication channels between the International Office and international students.

- Upgrade the online information systems to provide clear and concise information on admission requirements, visa and residence permit application procedures, accommodation options and availability, local culture and customs, and other university policies and procedures.

- Discuss with International TBU staff and find the ways how, where and when to remind to the international students all necessary information so they get it from various sources, times and places for better understanding. During that also do not to repeatedly emphasize importance of following all mentioned rules and deadlines in Czech culture with repeated argumentation on consequences if not followed.

- Expand the availability of Czech language courses to more experience levels to ensure motivation and more thorough learning path for long-term students and provide more resources for language practice and tutoring.

- Increase the availability of social and cultural events that promote interaction between international students and the local community. Increasing awareness and

information density about social and cultural event which are already in place is also suggested.

- Improve the quality and availability of accommodation options for international students, including providing options for shorter-term stays and more affordable options.

- Provide more information and support regarding healthcare options and procedures.

- Expand the availability of financial support and scholarships for international students.

- Increase the availability of employment opportunities for international students, including internships and part-time jobs.

- Provide more resources for sports and recreational activities. And Inform in more depth about present possibilities.

- In addition to the above recommendations, it is suggested that the university conducts regular surveys and focus groups with international students to ensure that the Welcome services are meeting their needs and expectations. This will allow for continuous improvement and adjustment of services and policies to better serve the international student community at TBU in Zlín.

- Overall, the proposed recommendations aim to create a more supportive and welcoming environment for international students at TBU in Zlín, thus contributing to their academic success and overall positive experience. It is important to note that the implementation of these recommendations requires collaboration and commitment from various university departments and stakeholders. However, the potential benefits for international students and the university as a whole are significant.

4.6 Expert validation / Pre-implementation feedback

The proposed changes should be reviewed and evaluated by university staff and current international students to ensure they are relevant and effective. Further surveys and feedback can be collected regularly to make necessary adjustments and improvements.

As experts have been used the 2 groups of stakeholders:

- International students of TBU in Zlín itself

- International department university staff members

4.6.1 Pre-implementation feedback by international students

International students, as the primary target users of the welcome services at TBU in Zlín, are in a unique position to provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness and appropriateness of these services. They have first-hand experience of the challenges and issues faced by international students, and are able to provide insights into their specific needs and preferences. By involving international students in the evaluation process, we can ensure that their voices are heard and that their needs to be considered.

Furthermore, international students are a diverse group, representing a variety of cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences. Their perspectives can help to identify potential cultural barriers and biases that may be present in the current design of the welcome services. This aligns with the principles of inclusive design, which emphasize the importance of designing for diversity and inclusivity.

In summary, the usage of international students as a form of "expert validation" is a valuable and justified approach in the design and evaluation of welcome services at TBU in Zlín, as it aligns with the principles of customer-oriented design thinking and inclusive design. Online confirmatory questionnaire was produced to confirm and quantify the experiences of TBU students and to evaluate already proposed improvements together with testing their motivation to become a driving force and to participate on some of the proposed improvements.

Two language versions of this online form were produced:

- English version of this online Google form was sent to international students studying in English programmes.

- Czech version of this online Google form was sent to international students from Czech study programmes.

91 answers were gathered from English long-term degree programmes students from total number of 232 present students.

32 answered were provided from students in Czech language programmes from total number of present students being 150+.
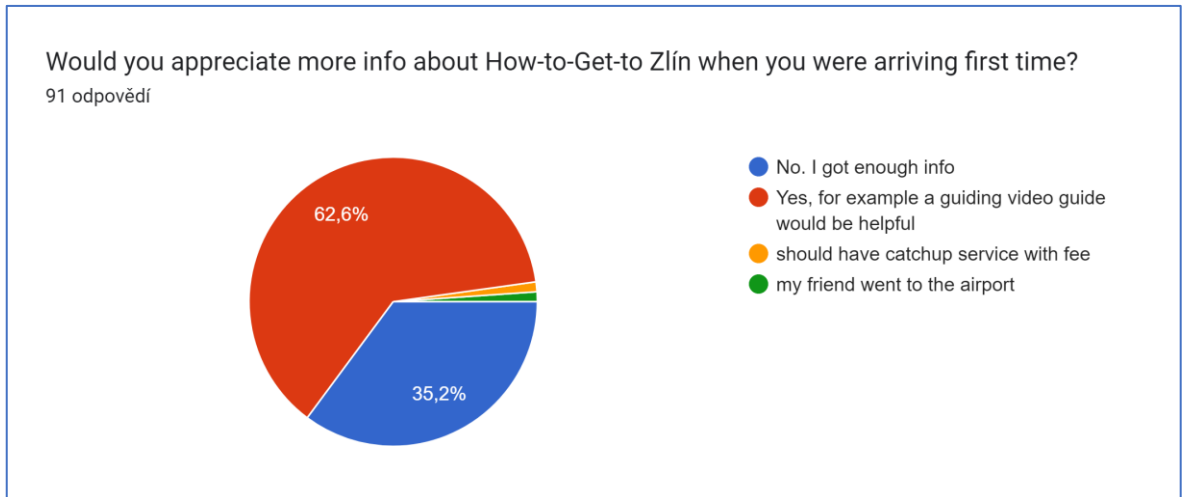
Would you appreciate more info about How-to-Get-to Zlín when you were arriving first time?
91 odpovědí

- No. I got enough info
- Yes, for example a guiding video guide would be helpful
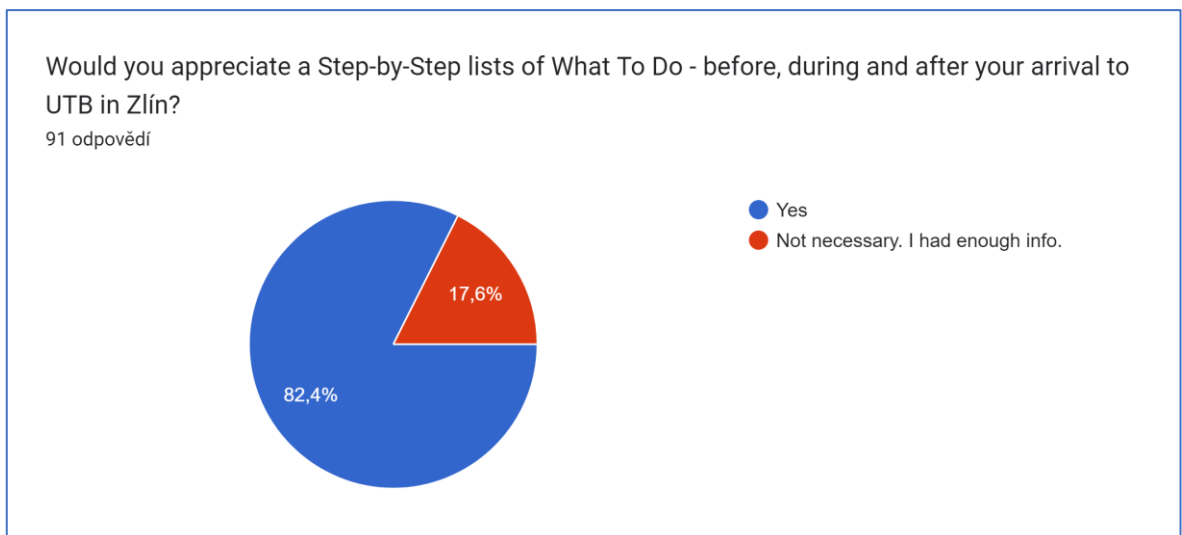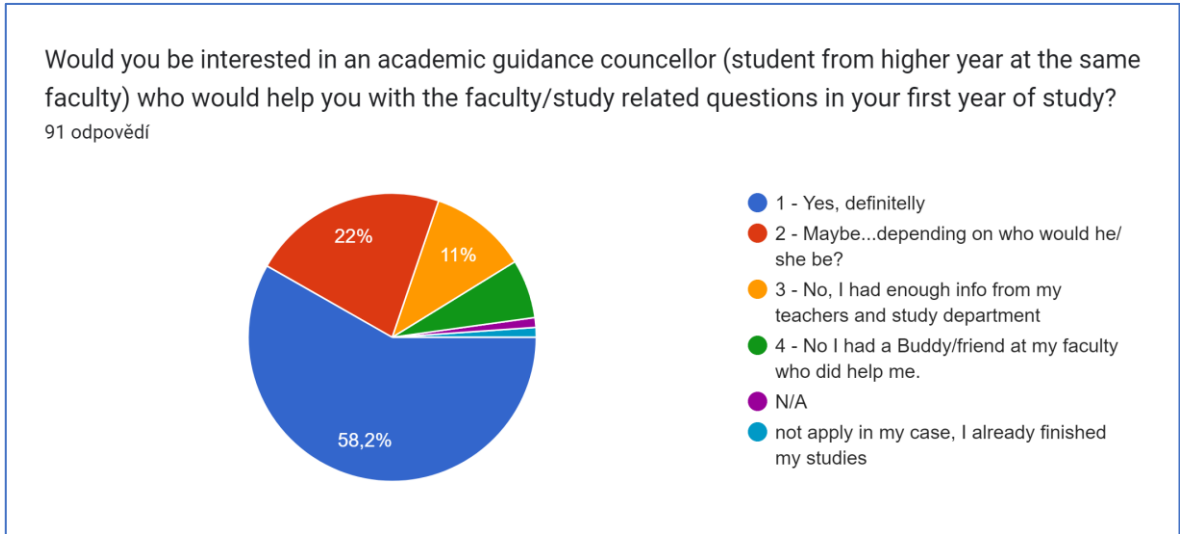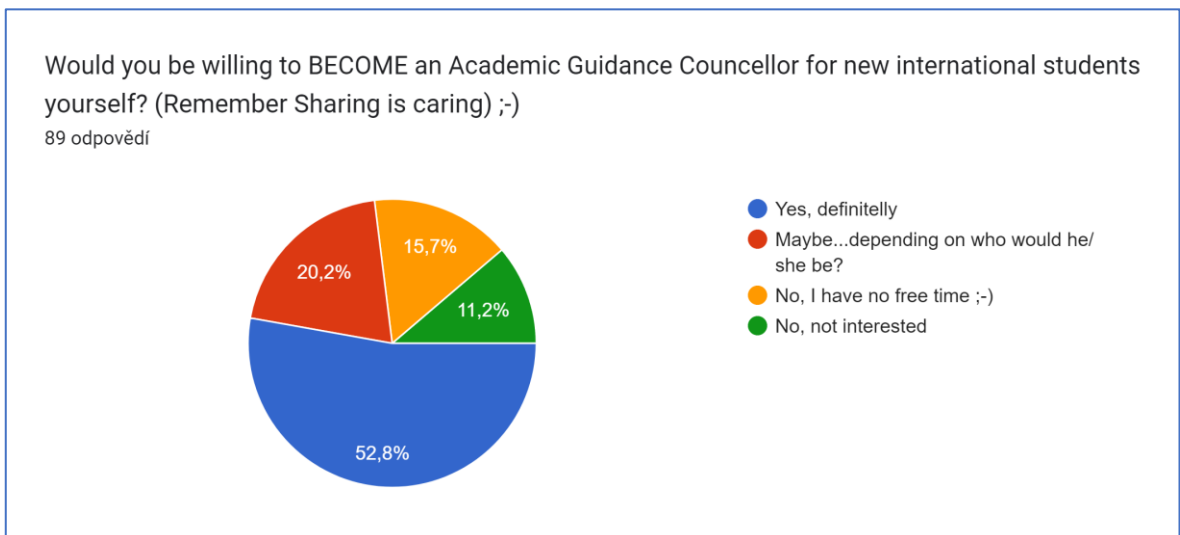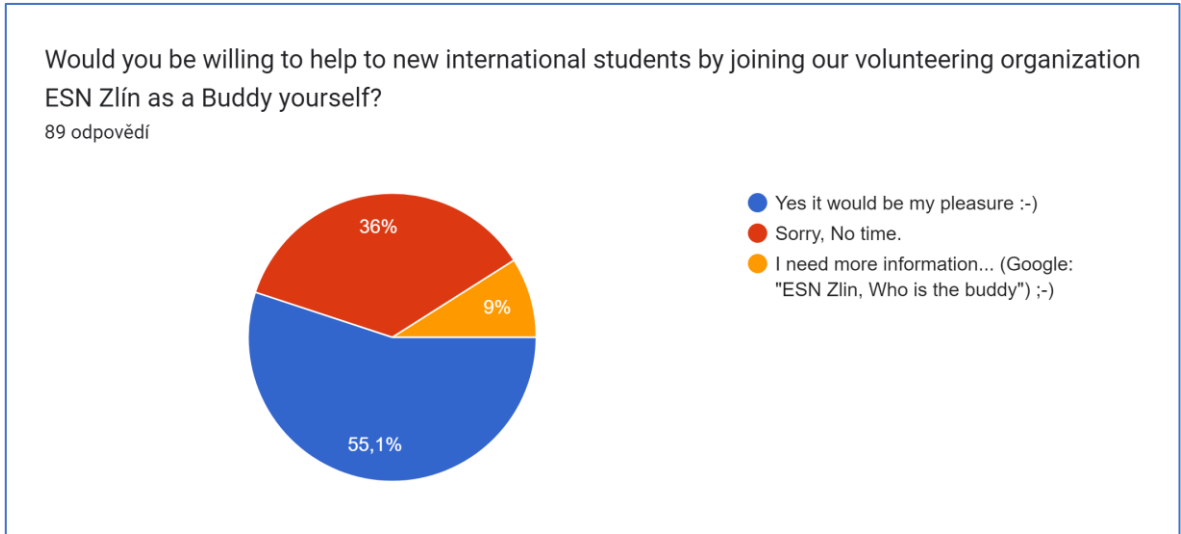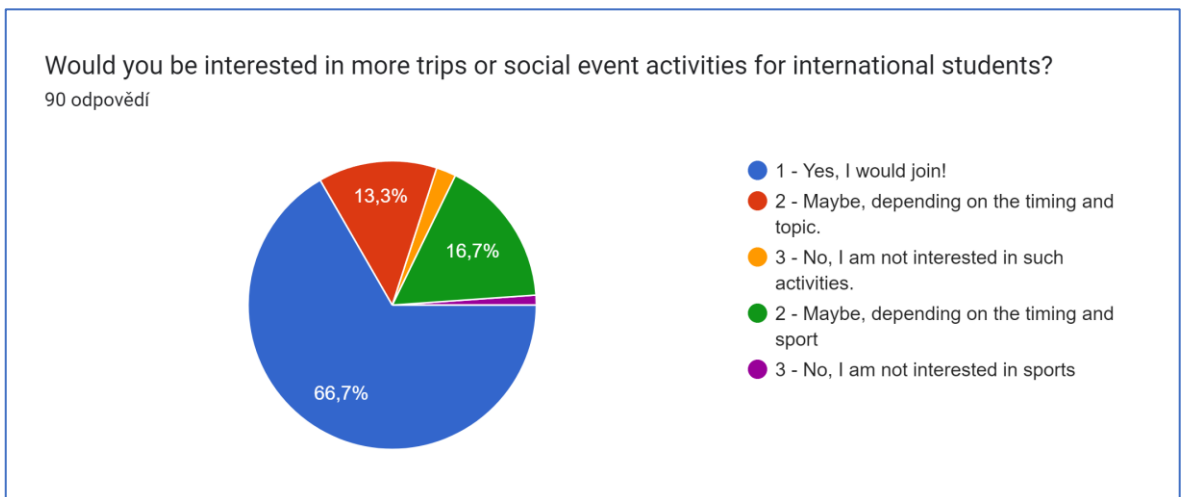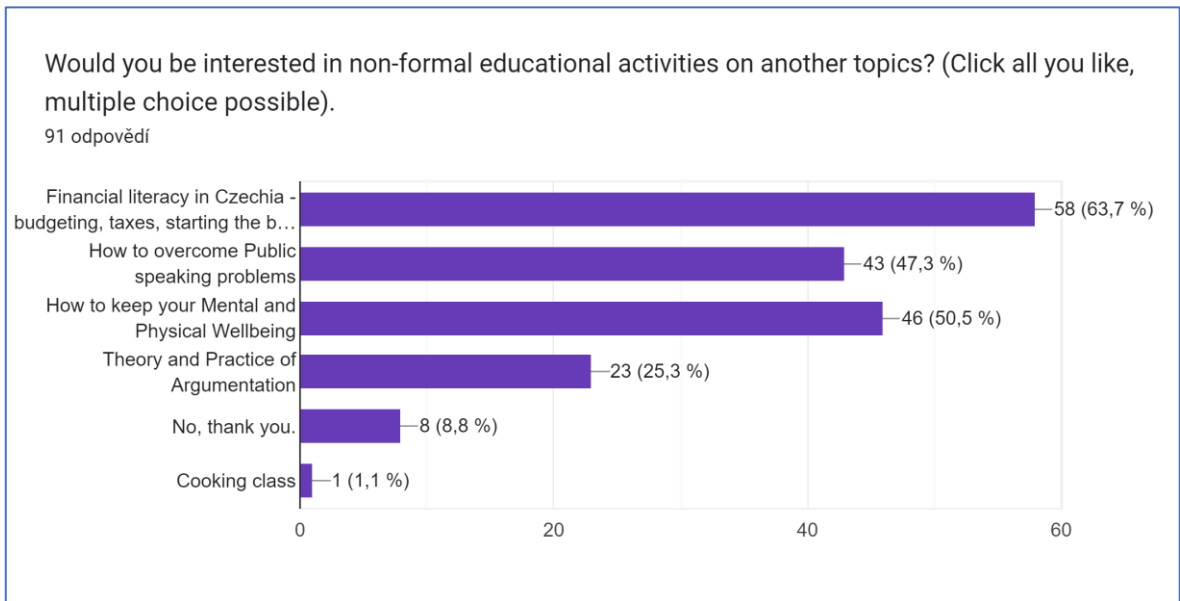- should have catchup service with fee
- my friend went to the airport

62,6%
35,2%

Figure 8 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you appreciate a Step-by-Step lists of What To Do - before, during and after your arrival to UTB in Zlín?
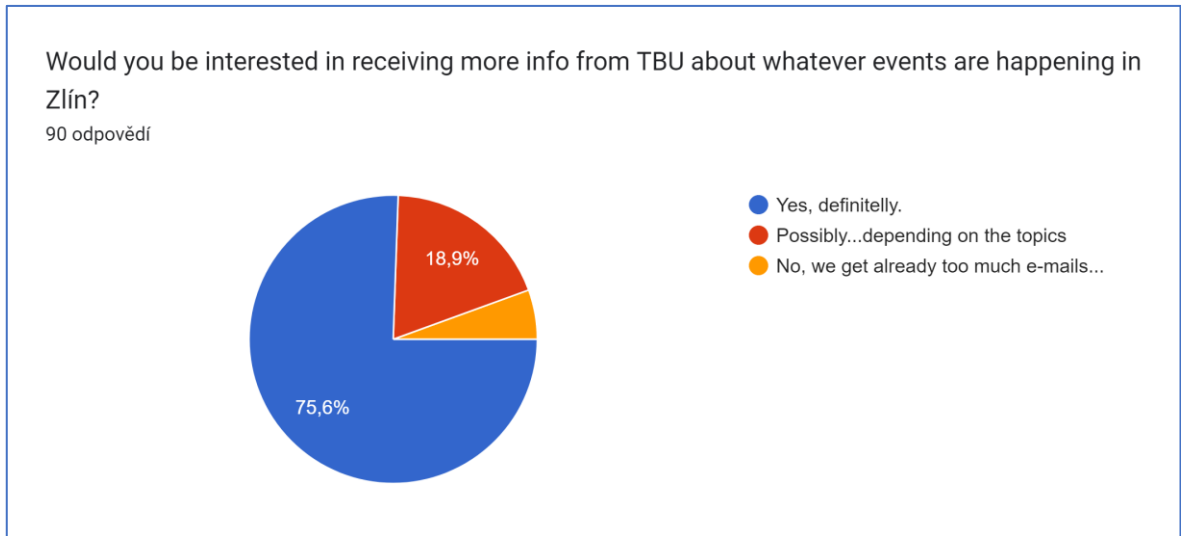91 odpovědí

- Yes
- Not necessary. I had enough info.

82,4%
17,6%

Figure 9 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be interested in an academic guidance councellor (student from higher year at the same faculty) who would help you with the faculty/study related questions in your first year of study?
91 odpovědí

- 1 - Yes, definitelly
- 2 - Maybe...depending on who would he/she be?
- 3 - No, I had enough info from my teachers and study department
- 4 - No I had a Buddy/friend at my faculty who did help me.
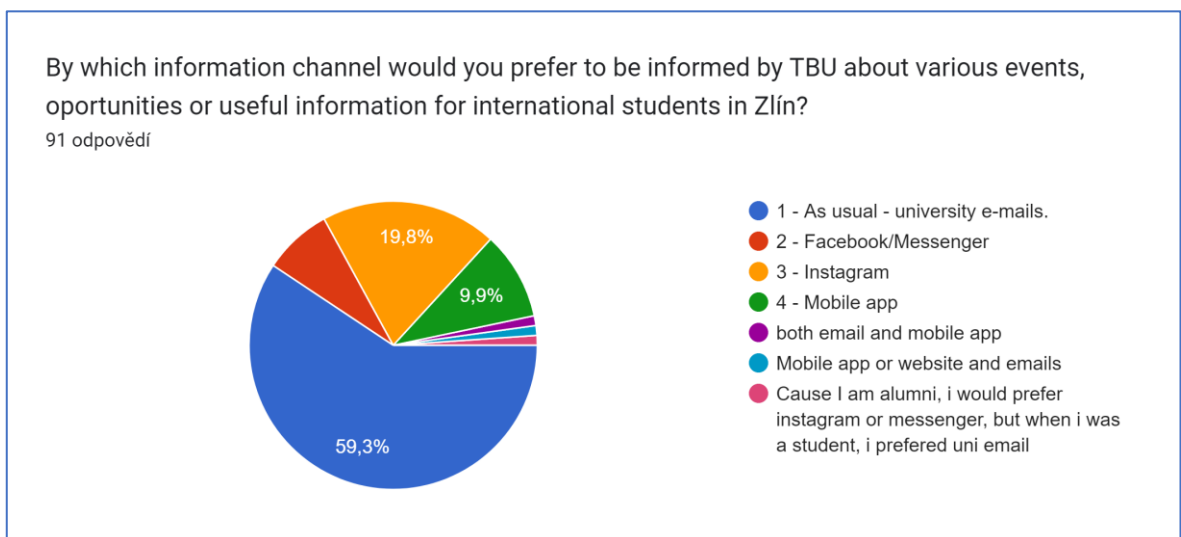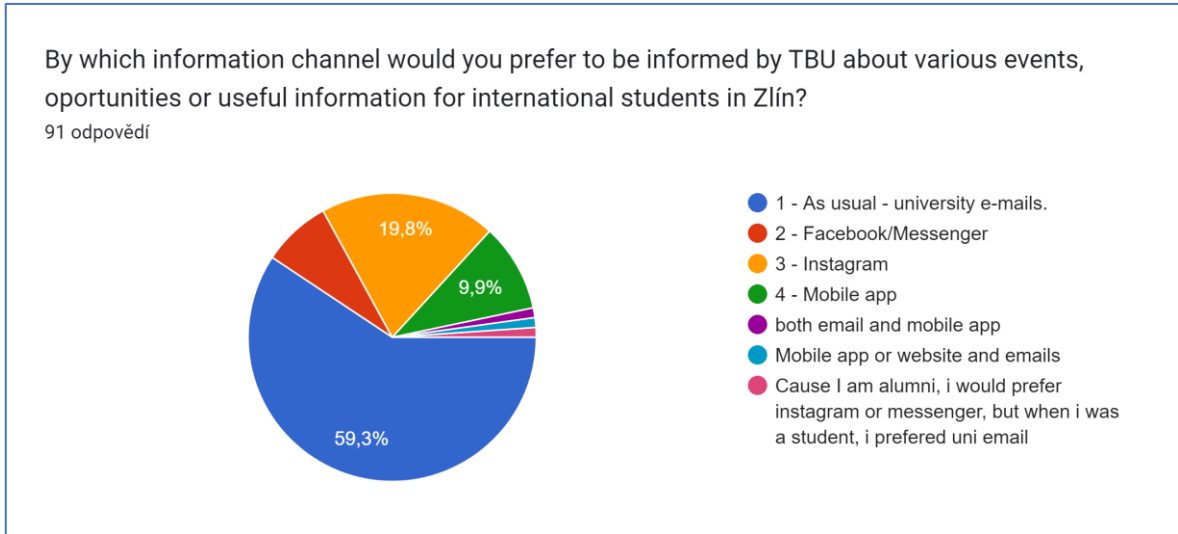- N/A
- not apply in my case, I already finished my studies

58,2% 22% 11%

Figure 10 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be willing to BECOME an Academic Guidance Councellor for new international students yourself? (Remember Sharing is caring) ;-)
89 odpovědí

- Yes, definitelly
- Maybe...depending on who would he/she be?
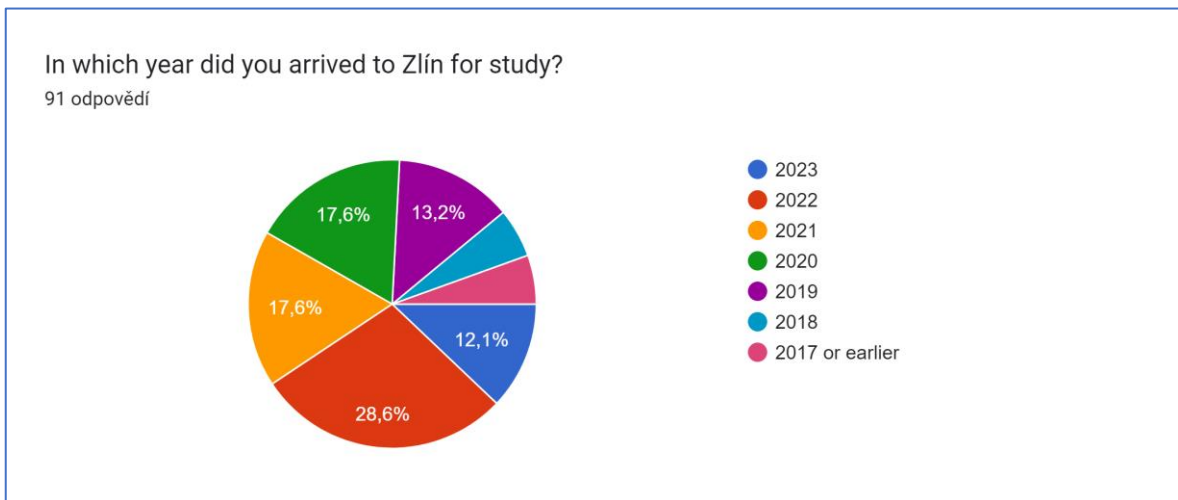- No, I have no free time ;-)
- No, not interested

52,8% 20,2% 15,7% 11,2%

Figure 11 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be willing to help to new international students by joining our volunteering organization ESN Zlín as a Buddy yourself?

89 odpovědí

- Yes it would be my pleasure :-)
- Sorry, No time.
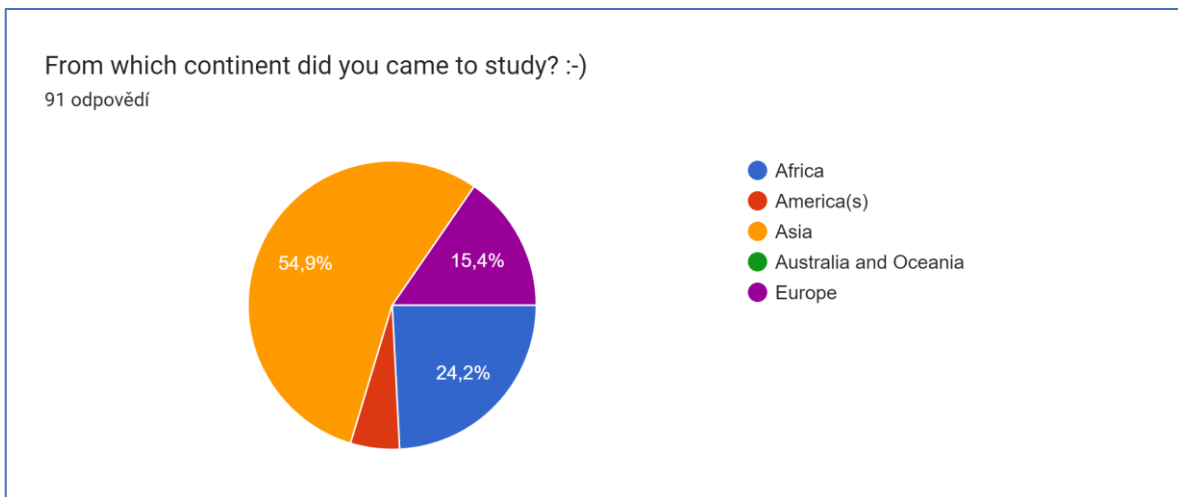- I need more information... (Google: "ESN Zlin, Who is the buddy") ;-)

36%

9%

55,1%

Figure 12 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be interested in more trips or social event activities for international students?

90 odpovědí

- 1 - Yes, I would join!
- 2 - Maybe, depending on the timing and topic.
- 3 - No, I am not interested in such activities.
- 2 - Maybe, depending on the timing and sport
- 3 - No, I am not interested in sports

13,3%

16,7%

66,7%

Figure 13 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be interested to join workshops which will give you insight in Cross-cultural communication differences for better understandin...r Czech and international colleages and teachers?

91 odpovědí

- 1 - Yes definitelly!
- 2 - Maybe... depending on my time schedule.
- 3 - No, I know enough ;-)

28,6%

68,1%

Figure 14 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be interested in non-formal educational activities on another topics? (Click all you like, multiple choice possible).

91 odpovědí

Financial literacy in Czechia - budgeting, taxes, starting the b… — 58 (63,7 %)
How to overcome Public speaking problems — 43 (47,3 %)
How to keep your Mental and Physical Wellbeing — 46 (50,5 %)
Theory and Practice of Argumentation — 23 (25,3 %)
No, thank you. — 8 (8,8 %)
Cooking class — 1 (1,1 %)

Figure 15 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Would you be interested in receiving more info from TBU about whatever events are happening in Zlín?

90 odpovědí

- Yes, definitelly.
- Possibly...depending on the topics
- No, we get already too much e-mails...

18,9%

75,6%

Figure 16 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

By which information channel would you prefer to be informed by TBU about various events, oportunities or useful information for international students in Zlín?

91 odpovědí

- 1 - As usual - university e-mails.
- 2 - Facebook/Messenger
- 3 - Instagram
- 4 - Mobile app
- both email and mobile app
- Mobile app or website and emails
- Cause I am alumni, i would prefer instagram or messenger, but when i was a student, i prefered uni email

19,8%

9,9%

59,3%

Figure 17 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Figure 18 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Figure 19 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

Figure 20 – Source: Appendix 1 - Follow-up Google form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services

4.6.2 Expert Validation by university staff members

Second group for expert validation is consisting from the **university staff members** who work directly with international students in the field of Internationalization. Due to their regular interactions with international students on a professional level they are in a good position to provide insights into the effectiveness of the proposed changes. Their expertise and perspectives are valuable in validating the proposed changes and ensuring their practicality and feasibility.

4.6.2.1 Feedback on Insufficient information issues

- "It is becoming evident that the problems of international students with services provided by TBU starts at the lack of awareness of international students about possibilities which are for them at TBU offered. Improvements in the level, intensity and media of information provided to the international students should be therefore definitely improved by all possible channels and the involvement of international students themselves in developing appropriate online platform for their information is appreciated. Such efforts can receive also a support and will be no doubt highly attractive topic for future thesis works of involved students whether it will be from the field of – IT, Design, Marketing and Communication or Management."

4.6.2.2 Feedback on Language and Communication barriers

- As for the presently offered Czech language courses at TBU – all Czech language teachers work at the full capacity of their respective contacts and it will be quite difficult also due to the present fiscal climate to expand costs in this area. Rather than increase in staffing it is recommended for student organizations such as ESN Zlín or TBU Student Union to organize more activities such as Language Café, Tandem (language) courses, or weekly Conversation club possibly on regular basis for example in newly opened Students' Club in the premises of U7 to develop the language proficiency of both international as well as local Czech and Slovak students.

4.6.2.3   Feedback on Social and Cultural isolation from local students

- Opportunity in this area can be gathered, perhaps surprisingly, from another weakness TBU services – a.k.a. reported lack of accommodation space for our International students within the TBU dormitories. In that case the **international students could be encouraged to seek the private accommodation within the Zlín town in shared apartments with their local Czech colleagues**. This is one of the most efficient and well proven forms how to bring down Social and Cultural barriers with local community. They can make quickly and easily friends with local students and due to their enhanced circles they will surely find out also new inspiration in terms of learning the language and surely also cross-cultural communication differences.

4.6.2.4   Feedback raising adaptation to academic workload

- 100% agreement with all mentioned points

- Welcome officer itself is encouraged to design, organize and perform workshops on the Topics of time management and academic expectations as it is believed that he can have also considerable space for improvement in such areas – Learning by Doing.

- Establish a mentorship program for connecting new international students with current students to provide support, guidance and orientation in the matters of study in their specific programmes could be a good opportunity for both local and international students for example in terms of pre-diploma internships.

4.6.2.5   Additional Feedback on the lack of English-speaking Health professionals

- International students are reporting lack of English-speaking health specialists in Zlín through-out the whole history of our university. As it is mostly out of our powers we can suggest at least possible improvement within the power of the TBU. At Faculty of Humanities there is a considerable amount of young future health-care professionals in training. Possibly it could be worth trying to start some Student Health Clinic where they could use their skills for helping other students or employees of TBU at least in terms of preventive medicine such as:
  - Regular health check-ups, including measuring blood pressure, sugar, and other vitals and diagnostic of basic health problems.

- It could be a win-win scenario for everyone. FHS students would gain and raise their competences in their future professional area, possibly could also use it as the mandatory practice teaching and our (international) students and employees would get an invaluable service from the university as a bonus.

- Plus especially in case of your newly incoming students from the countries of Global South, who are coming often seriously under-diagnosed that would be beneficial for all members of our university community.

- And students from Faculty of Technology could be able to supplement these services for example with Nutrition guidance etc.

LIMITATIONS OF THE THESIS

- **Sample size:** The sample size of international students interviewed or surveyed may be limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

- **Time constraints:** Due to the time constraints associated with the diploma thesis delivery, the researcher had to choose timely effective validation methods, which may have limitations in terms of their accuracy and comprehensiveness.

- **Language limitations:** The study was conducted in English and Czech languages, which may have excluded international students who do not speak either of these languages fluently or it may have limited their ability to express themselves fully.

- **Bias:** The study may be subject to bias, both from the researcher's perspective and from the participants' perspective. The researcher's background and experiences may have influenced the research questions, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, participants may have had their own biases and may not have felt comfortable sharing their true thoughts and experiences.

- **Institutional limitations:** The study was conducted at one specific institution, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or contexts.

- **Methodological limitations:** The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, which may have limitations in terms of the validity and reliability of the findings. Additionally, the use of automated coding software may have limitations in terms of its accuracy and may not capture the full complexity of the data.

- Despite its limitations, this thesis provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of international students in relation to the Welcome services provided by TBU in Zlín and lays the groundwork for further research in this area.

PROPOSAL FOR FUTURE WORKS

Based on the results of your thesis, here are some proposals for future work:

- Conduct a longitudinal study to assess the long-term impact of the proposed improvements on the experiences of international students at TBU in Zlín.

- Explore the experiences of international students from other countries and cultures to gain a better understanding of the unique challenges they face in adjusting to university life in Zlín.

- Investigate the feasibility of implementing language exchange programs to facilitate language practice and cultural exchange among international and local students.

- Develop a mentorship program that pairs international students with local students or staff members to provide additional support and guidance.

- Conduct a comparative study of welcome services and experiences for international students at TBU in Zlín and other universities in the Czech Republic or other European countries to identify best practices and areas for further improvement.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore and analyse problems and challenges faced by international students of TBU in Zlín in connection with the Welcome services provided, and subsequently to identify recommendations for improvement to further support the positive experience of international students at our university.

The theoretical part of the thesis provided a foundation for understanding the challenges that international students face in the context of higher education. Some of the key concepts that were explored included the challenges related to language and cultural barriers, social and academic integration, and the importance of effective support services for international students.

These concepts were important in the context of the research questions because they provided a framework for understanding the challenges that international students face at TBU in Zlín. Specifically, the theoretical part highlighted the importance of support services, including pre-arrival support, orientation programs, and ongoing support throughout the academic journey. The findings from the analytical and project parts of the thesis provided evidence of the need for improvements in these areas at TBU in Zlín. Three research questions were posed to guide the investigation.

Regarding the RQ1 were identified the most common problem areas faced by international students at TBU in Zlín in connection with the Welcome services provided. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of survey data, several key problem areas were identified, including insufficient information, language and communication barriers, social and cultural isolation, adaptation to academic workload, and lack of English-speaking health professionals.

Impact of the problems and challenges faced by international students in relation to the Welcome services provided was a problem to which RQ2 tried to find solution. As found they can have a significant impact on their overall experience at TBU in Zlín. The lack of adequate information about available services and resources, language and communication barriers, social and cultural isolation, and difficulty adapting to academic workload can all lead to negative experiences and decreased satisfaction with their time at TBU. In addition, the lack of English-speaking health professionals can further exacerbate their challenges and negatively impact their physical and mental health. The findings suggest that addressing these challenges through improvements to the Welcome services can have a positive impact

on international students' experiences and enhance their overall satisfaction with their time at TBU in Zlín.

As for RQ3: the experiences and recommendations for changes differ within the international students in English and Czech programs due to several factors such as language proficiency, cultural differences, and educational backgrounds. For instance, international students in English programs may have a higher level of English proficiency and may find it easier to communicate with faculty and staff from the very beginning. On the other hand, international students in Czech programs may face more language barriers with their teachers and classmates in the first semester. But then thanks to their quick learning curve of Czech language, including local accents and nuances, they break through most of the social and communication separation barriers more quickly than their colleagues in English programmes with local community. Additionally, the experiences and recommendations may also vary based on the students' academic disciplines, country of origin, and prior experiences studying abroad. Therefore, it is essential to consider these differences when developing and implementing changes to the welcome services provided by TBU in Zlín.

Based on the findings from this thesis, it is evident that there are several areas of improvement for the Welcome services provided by Tomas Bata University in Zlín. These areas include mainly: quality and scope of provided information, accommodation, administrative procedures, language barriers, social integration, support from university staff, adaptation to academic requirements, health-care, financial support, cultural differences, food options, employment opportunities, study materials, sports and recreational activities, and safety and security.

To address these issues, the following evidence-based recommendations have been proposed: To provide more comprehensive and easily accessible information during the application, admission and arrival process. To develop and implement language courses and resources that are tailored to the needs of international students. To increase support from university staff, including employment of volunteer academic advisors and student mentors, to aid in the adjustment to academic requirements and workload. To develop and promote social integration programs and activities that facilitate the interaction between international and local students. To expand and improve accommodation options and availability, with a focus on affordable and safe housing options. To provide more comprehensive and accessible information about local culture and customs to aid in the adjustment to a new cultural environment. To increase financial support for international students if possible,

including scholarships and grants. To develop and promote employment opportunities that are tailored to the needs and skills of international students.

These recommendations were validated through pre-implementation feedback from international students and expert validation from senior university staff from the area of international affairs. The proposed changes were deemed relevant and feasible in the specific context of TBU in Zlín.

In conclusion, the evidence-based recommendations proposed in this thesis have the potential to significantly improve the overall experience of international students at Tomas Bata University in Zlín. By implementing these changes, TBU can enhance its reputation as a welcoming institution for international students, and provide a more positive and supportive environment for their academic and personal growth.

The research questions were answered and the Diploma Thesis objective was met.

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LIST OF FIGURES

APPENDICES

Appendix P I: Follow-up on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services (online Google form) – English version

Appendix P II: Ověřovací dotazník Welcome služeb UTB pro české studijní programy (UTB Welcome Services Verification Questionnaire for Czech Study Programmes) - Czech version.

APPENDIX P I: Follow-up form on your experience and proposed improvements of welcome services - English verssion

Available from:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Id4V8Ha5MReZueKSCmKtm_cvGIuQXJP3srY83oBzCaU/edit#responses

Upon clicking the link and requesting access, access will be provided to interested parties.

If not functional (in the future) sent e-mail to brazdilik@utb.cz or brazdilik@google.com with request for access and such will be provided.

It will be printed and bound as a freely inserted APPENDIX inside the printed thesis.

APPENDIX P II: OVĚŘOVACÍ DOTAZNÍK WELCOME SLUŽEB UTB PRO ČESKÉ STUDIJNÍ PROGRAMY (UTB WELCOME SERVICES VERIFICATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CZECH STUDY PROGRAMMES) - CZECH VERSION

Available from:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15U2o0SVVrwXly_4evuRmVmVwuzb218ArCbH7LAlERl8/edit#responses

Upon clicking the link and requesting access, access will be provided to interested parties.

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