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“YOU ARE NOT THE SAME” — EXPERIENCES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Abstract

International students face numerous socio-cultural and academic challenges in their country of studying. The paper deals with the impact of the international studying experience on changing different aspects of international students' lives. It relies on the results obtained within the IS-MIGaIN project, both via quantitative and qualitative methods. The aim of the research is to investigate the attitudes and experiences by international students in terms of whether and to what extent the migration experience has influenced the (re)construction of their personal and socio-cultural identity, in their own subjective perception. For the data analysis, descriptive statistical analysis, as well as thematic analysis via the MAX-QDA 2024 program have been used. The experiences of change during studying abroad have been presented from the perspective of international students in Serbia and students from Serbia who either studied or are still studying abroad. The results indicate that there are complex and versatile experiences of transformation in different aspects of personality and life of international students, during the process of adaptation to the academic and socio-cultural framework of the society and state in which they study. A conclusion may be drawn that international students do recognise how much and in what way they have changed through interaction with new environment, and they mainly accept these changes and assess them as positive and useful.

Keywords: adaptation, identity, international students, migration, changes

According to previous research international students belong to the group of sojourners – persons who temporarily (for a limited period of time) reside abroad with a specific purpose (Ward & Kenedi, 1993; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga & Szapocznik, 2010). Sojourning, as a phenomenon of an individual's temporary residence in a society which, in terms of culture (common values, beliefs and norms), differs from their country of origin, has been becoming more and more pronounced in recent decades (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010).

International students, as one of the categories of sojourners, undergo processes of adjustment and intercultural adaptation to their new social environment.

Intercultural adaptation assumes changes in feelings, attitudes and behaviour (Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006). Having analysed the relevant literature, Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus concluded that the terms of adjustment and adaptation were usually used interchangeably, especially in papers dealing with the population of international students (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). However, there are authors who believe that adaptation is the process of facing intercultural transition, while adjustment is the result thereof, or vice versa; as well as authors who use adjustment to refer to minor changes, and adaptation for major ones (Ibid.). According to Berry's acculturation model, acculturation¹ implies the process of psychological and cultural changes that occur upon an intercultural contact, while adaptation is a result of the complex process of creating new and maintaining old links in terms of the cultures of the societies of origin and destination (Berry, 1997). However, some authors in their papers equal acculturation and adaptation, or acculturation and transformation of identity (Chirkov, 2009).

It is believed that migrants' adaptation is the first step in their integration and as such, it is usually taken to be a one-way process, unlike integration which operates in two ways (Лукић, 2018; Cormos, 2022). According to Berry (2006), integration is one of the four acculturation strategies² (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation), whereby four categories of migrants involved in the process are also distinguished: voluntary migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and sojourners (Berry, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). Unlike the initial interpretations of the term of acculturation, since the second half of the 20th Century acculturation has been perceived in a wider sense, i.e. as a process of interaction between cultures (Akhtariyeva, Ibragimova & Tarasova, 2019). Namely, acculturation is usually defined as an interaction between the maintenance of cultures: sojourner's wish to maintain their cultural identity formed in the society of their country of origin, and the wish to initiate contact with members of the destination society and actively participate in the new society on the other hand (Hofhuis, Hanke & Rutten, 2019). Considering the two main dimensions of acculturation: relation to the culture of country of origin and relation to the culture of country of destination (contact), Ward and Rana-Deuba distinguish, during the intercultural transition, between psychological (emotional) and socio-cultural (behavioural) adaptation, with a positive correlation between them (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Several studies, especially those dealing with the population of international students, indicate that exposure to different culture may have positive as well as negative aspects, depending on the degree of adaptation to new cultural and social environment (Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok, 1987;

¹ Perceived through the attitudes, beliefs, values and identities of migrants.

² They concern conceptualisation of the identities of country of origin and host country.

Zhou, Jindal-Snape & Topping, 2008). A specific trait of international students, when compared to other population groups in the process of adaptation, is the existence of academic adaptation which is especially highlighted, in addition to the two aforementioned perspectives on adaptation, by some authors (Zhou & Todman, 2009; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). Therefore, it is stated for international PhD students that they undergo a triple transition in their lives, including relocation to another country, and transfer to a new education system with different expectations, as well as a different level of academic studies (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). In addition to these changes, there is a certain period of personal development and adaptation to the host society. During the process of adaptation to the new value system and cultural norms, international students leave the established norms and expectations, and thus also their comfort zone, experiencing their own changes in the new environment (Petrić & Lukić, 2023). This is particularly challenging during the first year of their studies and living abroad, when new relationships with other students, teachers and members of the society in the country of studying are being built.

Ignjatović and Stanojević (2022) highlight the relevance of the life course perspective on studying demographic phenomena, including migration as one of the three main demographic components (Ignjatović & Stanojević, 2022). In relation to this, students may be perceived as young people, in the phase of life which involves transition between childhood and adulthood, when after leaving their parents' homes they face new situations and experiences. However, the life course of students also has its phases, including the periods before enrolling a faculty, during the studies and post-graduation. For those studying abroad, the processes of adjustment and adaptation into the new social environment occur in the second phase of the course.

Numerous researchers emphasise that different phases and changes which accompany the migration process and the inevitably related process of adaptation of international students to a new and different education environment, culture and society, lead towards development and changes of the identity of individuals, within the social environment (Zhou, et al., 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Markov & Periklieva, 2023). It is just this development of a coherent sense of selfhood and identity that is one of the crucial developmental goals in adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Various research findings from the previous decade have enriched our knowledge not only when it comes to the manner and degree to which the experience of studying abroad impacts the development of one's identity, but also the types and manner of functioning of the facilitators of identity change, which help the students to overcome obstacles during the process of adjusting to the new academic and socio-cultural environment (Severino, Messina & Liorent; 2014; Ng, Haslam, A., Haslam, C. & Cruwys, 2018).

According to the foundational conceptions of the social-cognitive theory, originally named the theory of social learning, which deals with the learning processes within a concrete social environment, what is crucial is the interaction between personal, behavioural and social factors, i.e. persons, behaviour and environment (Bandura, 2002; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023). The main conception is that within a concrete social context, individuals initiate interaction with their surroundings and among themselves, where learning through perception is considered the main manner of cognition and social shaping of the individuals.

Bearing in mind all of the above, and inspired by the concept of intercultural adaptation which implies changes in feelings, attitudes and behaviours, this article uses socio-cultural perspective to investigate the impact of the experience of studying abroad on changes in different aspects of personal life of international students, through their subjective perception. The posed research questions are the following:

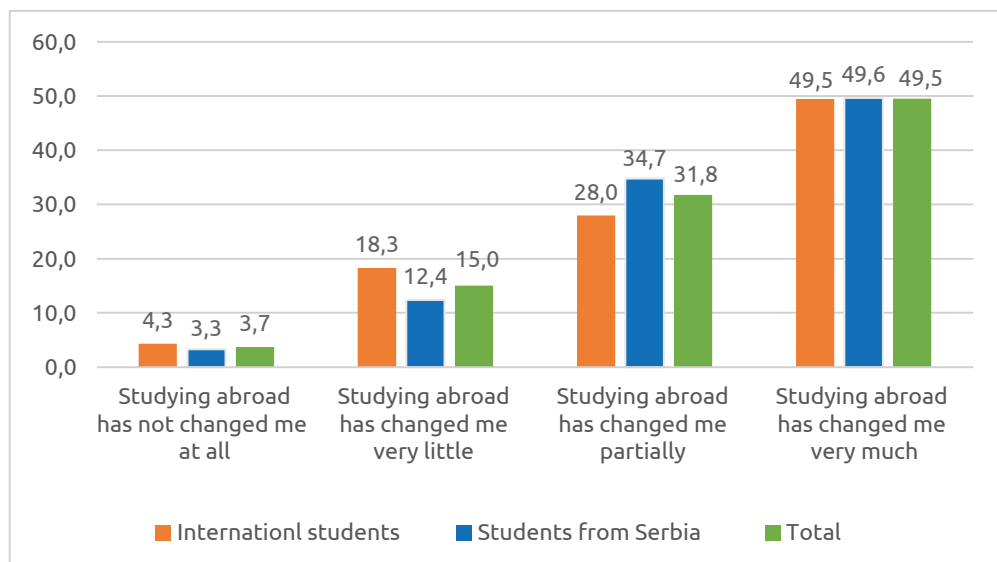
- Whether the dynamic and complex experience of studying abroad influences changes in the lives of international students, and if yes, what dimensions of different identities these changes refer to? and
- What the experiences of international students reveal to us about the changes in their lives that they identified during their studying abroad, and what their attitude towards these changes is?

The paper has been prepared based on the results of the IS-MIGaIN project, which involved application of both quantitative and qualitative methods, explained in detail in the chapter containing methodological remarks. This paper is oriented on the data obtained via an e-questionnaire, but also the data from the focus groups and qualitative interviews, with the aim to examine whether the experiences acquired while studying outside one's native country have impact on the changes in perception of self and others, and what kind of impact that might be.

Under the influence of different environments, international students are subject to changes, while due to the transformative potential of international higher education, also being the agents of these changes, both in their own lives and in the society. They thereby contribute to the creation of transnational social spaces (Schröer & Schweppe, 2011; Clifford & Montgomery, 2015; Wang, Hanley, Kwak et al., 2024). However, the authors emphasise that, in spite of the significance they have due to their numbers, international students remain an under-researched subcategory of mobile population (Findlay, 2011). We would also like to add that this population group is also under-researched in the context of Serbia, in spite of its social significance.

RESULTS

Analysis of responses to the question which points to the link between studying abroad and personal changes: “Which of the provided answers best describes you?” shows that the majority of the respondents (81.3%) believes that studying abroad changed them. Almost half of the respondents (49.5%) says that studying abroad changed them very much, while the smallest number of them believes that studying abroad changed them very little (graph 1.)

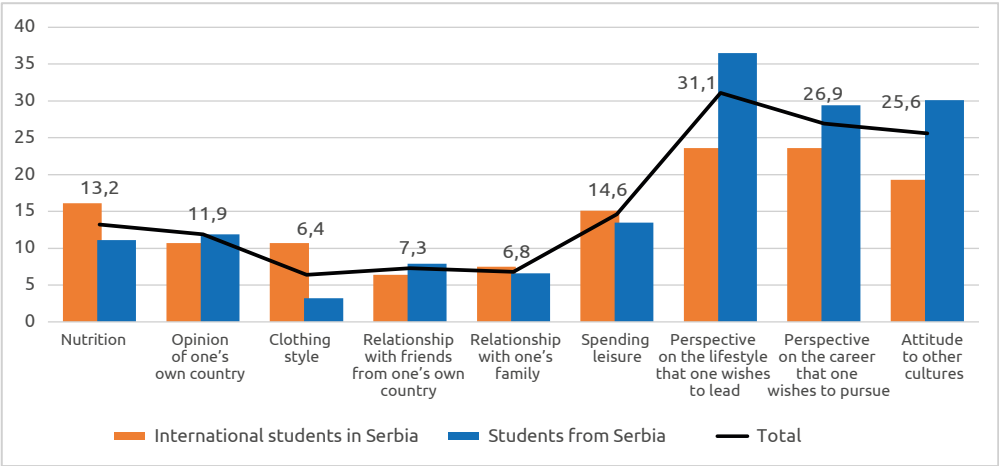


Graph 1. “Which of the provided answers best describes you?” – Subjective assessment of the impact of studying abroad on personal changes (%)

Considered in terms of one’s country of origin, there is no difference in either group of the respondents, and in almost one half the opinion prevails that studying abroad changed them very much. However, a greater share of international students studying in Serbia than Serbian students studying abroad believe that studying abroad changed them very little, or just partially changed them (Graph 1).

Starting from the process of adjustment and intercultural adaptation, international students’ attitudes concerning studying abroad have been examined, in terms of changes in nutrition habits and clothing style, their relation to other cultures, changes in the opinion on one’s country of origin, attitude towards the career they wish to pursue, relation to family and friends, but also the manner of spending leisure and the lifestyle they wish to lead. These components are related to the behavioural and cognitive items in the acculturation index according to Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999).

If we analyse what components of identity these changes concern, we can see that the greatest share of the respondents stated that in their lives, the attitude to other cultures, career and the lifestyle they wished to lead changed entirely. These changes are more visible when it comes to the students originating from Serbia (Graph 2).



Graph 2. “What and to what extent, in your opinion, has changed in your life since you went abroad up until today?” (%)

In order to understand these results better, after analysing students’ responses, the experiences of change during the studies have been presented in international students’ words. In the analysis operated through the MAXQDA 2024 program, within the category of “migration experience”, the subcategory of “changes caused by the migration perceived” has been recorded 40 times. Out of this number, it has been recorded 13 times in the focus group interviews and 27 times in the qualitative interviews.

Similar to findings by other authors, such as Gu et al. (2010) or Cormos (2022), among the perceived changes, the respondents list those that concern their own identity: changes in mentality, living principles, lifestyle, or changed perception of self. The respondents primarily highlight development of their personality: “(...) I kind of started to build my personality” (F, 28, Serbia); and gaining greater independence: “I started living the adulthood life” (F, 28, Serbia), “(...) so I somehow needed to manage it all on my own, and I always thought that I wasn’t that independent” (F, 29, Austria); confidence: “(...) “I feel like I’ve gained more confidence living abroad because (...) you face different challenges, different experiences and it brings you out of your comfort zone” (M, 26, Serbia), “I feel much better in the sense that I also have more confidence” (F, 29, Austria); greater communicativeness and openness: “Prior to going to study abroad, I was a shy person, I was not

that communicative (...) So, this idea of freedom, when I stepped foot outside of my country, it was a new world for me" (F, 28, Serbia), "I realized that I became way more direct (...) I mean, I think it really changed that side of my character (...) So I learned to cut 90% of the intro and trying to be more direct and also I learned regarding that to watch a little bit less my mouth. But I know that I won't be judged as a person, that I'm not going to be judged as being evil or stupid just because I said something that is evil or stupid" (F, 30, Serbia); but also putting up borders with respect to others: "(...) it's putting up borders where in our country (...) you feel awkward, you keep making all sorts of excuses (...) That kind of a less refined openness, which I find quite OK." (F, 33, Austria) Though these have also been reported by some of the male respondents, the changes in terms of greater independence have mostly been noted by the female respondents.

New and different academic environment and lifestyle also caused better organisation: "(...) I think I became much better organised because there, for them, organisation is the priority, it's all kind of programmed (...) So my organisation somehow become a bit better when I came back (...) I think I had been quite disorganised before. This was the main change for me." (F, 29, Austria); as well as becoming more qualified in different aspects of professional life: "I've become more sure of my own skills, what I know, and what I don't, which is important (...) You get this personal integrity (...) When I look back, I get this impression that as a person, I have become qualified for different aspects of professional life and there's not much doubt there. This difference is the greatest benefit." (M, 30, Germany) Internalising new learning styles has also been reported: "(...) I see how much this kind of learning changed me, and I approach things that way even now, which is hard to change. Professional to personal identity. That's what changed for me there" (F, 31, France), which is consistent with the findings of Gu et al. (2010).

Studying abroad has also influenced the lifestyle that the respondents want to lead:

„It has also made me reflect on who I am as a person and what I want to do if I truly want to do what I said that I wanted to do.“ (M, 26, Serbia);

“... what I learned from here is self-care. The priorities for yourself, which one person needs (...)” (F, 29, Serbia),

as well as better understanding of other cultures and acceptance of difference:

“I'm getting to know the world. I'm getting to know new cultures.” (F, 20, Serbia);

“First I was having a very good time as I told you like a culture shock (...) I think it changed me a lot (...)” (F, 30, Serbia);

"It's nice to experience a new system, a culture (...) get more understanding of the orthodox faith. And it's quite interesting because I like to learn about faiths and, you know, like how people are like (...)" (M, 26, Serbia);

"The greatest change for me is that it became normal to be surrounded by people from different countries." (M, 34, Germany)

The changes in the characteristics of their own personality perceived during and after studying abroad are assessed by the respondents as positive, meaning that they please them:

"(...) it all makes me richer as person. I still cannot define it, but I feel I am changing... in a positive way" (F, 22, Serbia);

"I'm really enjoying like I feel that I'm changing" (F, 20, Serbia);

"(...) this changed me forever and I am happy" (F, 33, Austria);

"So it kind of (...) is making me know myself more in a way, which is great!" (F 30, Serbia).

However, studying abroad creates difficulties in maintaining connection with friends in the country of origin (Ng, Haslam A & Haslam C, 2018). This is also highlighted by a respondent who has been studying abroad for a long time: *"Some of my friendships are weaker than they used to be. Because with the number of people I meet here and those that I have at home, it's quite hard to communicate with all of them all the time, so I guess that some of them get crossed when I don't respond." (F, 22, Canada)*

Among the highly educated returnees to Serbia, in addition to the maintenance of the identity foundation created in the primary community and society of origin, some new forms of understanding of one's own personality have also been perceived (Vesković Anđelković & Vasojević, 2023). A returnee from studies abroad highlights the change in the attitude towards the country of origin: *"For me, the greatest change in my perception is that I value my place of origin much more. I see Serbia from a different perspective. We travelled, we saw and in the end we returned to the place in which we realised. For the first time I see the values, advantages compared to the places where I lived. Serbia is great" (M, 32, Italy),* while such a change has not occurred in a female respondent living abroad: *"(...) I haven't noticed that anyone (...) tells me I changed in this sense (...) I never felt that much this national spirit in relation to Serbia. It's never that important to me, so I don't feel I distanced myself from my homeland or from Serbia. This is the place where I live, just as Serbia was the place where I lived, and I feel more attached to the people I love in Serbia and people I love here than to some national context." (F, 29, Germany)*

Also, studying abroad influences the newly emerging need to highlight one's origin, both among our students abroad and international students studying in Serbia. The respondents who highlight this believe that this is something that is important to emphasise when being introduced to others in their country of studying: *"While I was at home, this was well-known, so no need to talk about that. (...) I am here an absolute stranger so what makes me different from others is my origin, where I come from and my identity is linked to that, of course. It is particularly important to me for people to know where I'm from, that I'm proud of that, because there's no need for this to be otherwise, and simultaneously a little more is known about me, when my origin is known"* (F, 23, Hungary). *"(...) first of all, I'm very much proud in representing my country. So the very first thing, which I mean, I will use is my country name, okay, that I am from this, country, this part of the world (...) Because people forget the names. So the country is the thing for which most of the people know that. So they will remember about me, the country (...)"* (M, 29, Serbia)

The respondents perceive different lived experiences as transformative, which is evident not only to them, but also to their friends and family:

"The time being in Serbia has changed me a lot, really. It changed me to another person. Maybe when I came back to visit my family, they so they will see another return." (F, 20, Serbia);

"(...) one of my friends told me, Césaria you're not the same. What happened to you?" (F, 28, Serbia)³

As Howe et al. have shown, international students recognise the transformation as one of the three dimensions of internationalisation, and they describe it as "adaptation to different cultures", "acceptance of different norms", or "departure from one's own identity and entering another one" (Howe, Ramirez & Walton, 2023:120). Positive transformative experiences of adaptation to new environment, due to studying abroad, are described by one of the respondents in the following way:

"(...) it gives you an opportunity to experience new things and how to adjust to, you know, different challenges (...) If you don't come out of your comfort zone, you won't ever, you know, you will always be used to one way of, you know, one way of living or being (...) you're not going to build your character yourself (...)" (M, 26, Serbia)

The students are aware of the dynamics of changes, but it is hard to discern the causes of some of the perceived changes, i.e. to fully ascribe them to the experience of studying abroad, having in mind – *"that we simply change as we mature*

³ It is this quote that has served as a part of the title of this paper.

and grow old". (F, 32, Germany) However, as a consequence of studying abroad, one respondent perceives a change in other people's attitude towards him: "(...) what I perceive is that there's a difference when it comes to other people towards me. The fact that I study abroad is something wonderful, something huge, though I don't see it like that at all, nor do I feel it, but I see people's attitude towards me (...) the people changed somehow. This was surprising". (M, 34, Germany)

In addition to the changes that international students experience over time, there are social changes occurring in both the country of studying and country of origin that also require adjustment. Thereby a respondent, who had studied abroad and now attends an MA program in Serbia, says: *"And for me, (...), for example, who study abroad, when I come back, I have to (...) it's like, you know, knowing your country, (...) I mean coming back after six years, everything changes. So, when I came, it's like I'm trying to know my country back again and trying to know things that six years before I didn't know and I believe that same situation will happen once I go back – because two years in Serbia – a lot has changed in my country and during this two year's period I didn't go back to my home, not even once, so after this it will be like, again, a full explosion of emotions and a new set of learning (...)". (F, 28, Serbia)* Sharing her experience of the change that has occurred, one respondent highlights that she is aware that the behavioural patterns that she has adopted during her studying in Serbia would perhaps not be appropriate in some other environment: *"(...) I don't know if someday I migrate how I'm gonna cope again with that blindness I mean how to unlearn again and to be like more subtle and more but yeah it's very good really I got rid also of that fear (...) of being able to speak my mind and that's wonderful". (F, 30, Serbia)*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We witness increasing internationalisation not only of higher education, but also of the social relations in contemporary world. In the modern knowledge-based society, highly educated population with the skills of cultural sensitivity and increased tolerance to others is significant from the perspective of the exchange of knowledge and experiences as well as social cohesion.

Though they cannot be generalised, the results of this research show that, due to facing different socio-cultural and academic challenges of functioning in new environment and adaptation, international students experience pronounced and various changes of aspects of their personality. It is noted that studying abroad contributes to one's personal development, lifestyle, as well as openness to new cultures and practices in the society in which they live and study. The aforementioned changes that concern better understanding of other cultures and acceptance

of diversity are more present in the descriptions of experiences of adaptation of the students studying in Serbia, since the cultural differences between country of origin (Pakistan, Nigeria, Argentina, Suriname, Syria, etc.) and country of studying, are greater. The respondents from Serbia predominantly study in European countries and what they perceive is a higher degree of multiculturalism in these environments, compared to Serbia and its relatively low rate of immigration. Changes after studying abroad are realised through transformation and building of their place and role in the new society, as a result of interaction between international students and population of the country in which they study, as well as a wider social environment that shapes the processes of adaptation and acculturation. The analysis of students' stories and life reveals different experiences, though majority of the changes are assessed as positive and useful by international students, except for weakening of certain friendly relations.

According to the theory of intercultural adaptation, be they immigrants or temporary migrants, individuals change over time in new and unfamiliar socio-cultural environment, by adjusting themselves to it. In this process, they are stimulated to "conform to ways of thinking and acting that are consistent or compatible with the prevailing cultural practices of the environment" learning to change their old habits (Kim, 2001: 51). The results confirm the fundamental theses of socio-cognitive theory in explaining the process of socio-cultural adaptation of international students who come in interaction with the environment in which they currently reside, learning through perception. Namely, "whereas explicit cultural norms can be learnt from books, implicit norms can only be acquired from members of a given culture", through interaction (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016:769). This is supported by the detailed qualitative data from the qualitative interviews led with students studying in Serbia: *"From the people I learn every time I learn something new from them (...) I learn their things also and how to approach them. It changed my way of thinking towards people (...) I have observed here which has impacted me also (...)"* (F, 29, Serbia); *"That's where I learnt, that's how I grew up to be the woman I am. And every day is a learning section (...)"*. (F, 28, Serbia)

Speaking of her experience of migration and studying, a respondent says: *"(...) it probably made me more resilient"*. (F, 30, Serbia) This confirms findings of other authors, who emphasise the resilience and capability to adapt of international students through changes and development of their personality, so as to overcome difficulties and achieve success through using one's own strengths (Gu et al., 2010; Lilyman & Benneth, 2014).

In addition to international students' active impact on their own migration experiences, as they make independent decisions, their choices and possibilities are certainly influenced by the dynamic social context which shapes the processes of adaptation and acculturation (Gu et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2010). The

results of a research project implemented with international students in Canada (Tavares, 2021) about the ways in which their multiple and diverse experiences influenced their identity construction, by using three different theoretical perspectives on identity, indicate the importance of the socio-cultural context in all three perspectives. “Without paying critical attention to context(s), identity is seen as static and as a choice of the individual completely (...)” (Tavares, 2021:93). Talking about upgrading her personality as an outcome of interactions with different socio-cultural environments, a respondent who studied in China, and now attends an MA program in Serbia, says: „when I came here to Serbia, Belgrade, I also had some more packages put into this person, this character that it’s what I am, it’s me (laugh)”. (F, 28, Serbia) Starting from the postulates of the social learning theory, it can be said that the process of adaptation of international students is determined by interconnection of different impact factors. Identity change is operated in a social context different than that in their country of origin, so the previously formed identity is now reshaped in the new socio-cultural environment, through an interaction of personal, behavioural and social factors. In the end, we may say that the results of this research clearly confirm the findings of previous research (Gu et al., 2010; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Liu & Rathbone, 2021) that the experience of studying abroad is transformative and it assumes a certain degree of identity change.

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