

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

This study aims to analyze academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students who study at Hungarian universities, applying an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The merging integration procedure was used to integrate quantitative and qualitative data at the results level. The key theories provided the theoretical foundation for the study, including Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), Zimmerman and Pintrich's models of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 1989; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

The study highlights gaps in knowledge regarding academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students, as well as the predominant focus of previous empirical research on domestic student population. Considering the rapid growth of international students worldwide and in Hungary due to the Internationalisation of higher education, there is a rising demand for the analysis of academic motivation and SRL among international students, an increasing number of educators are paying attention to the necessity of helping students become motivated and self-regulated learners (Boekaerts & Cascallar, 2006; Kim, Raza, & Seidman, 2019; Pintrich 2000; Schunk 2005; Winardi, 2024; Yue & Lu, 2022). Emphasizing the importance of intrinsic motivation, satisfaction of basic psychological needs during study, application of self-regulated learning strategies, and self-efficacy.

The results of the mixed-method study explain quantitative findings on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students at Hungarian universities using qualitative insights, based on common domains and developing meta-inferences. This study reveals that international students endorsed more items related to intrinsic motivation than to extrinsic motivation. At the same time, students supported more items in cognitive strategies, such as elaboration and organizing strategies, in self-regulated learning. Moreover, significant differences were identified in motivation and self-regulated learning among international students across different levels of study (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral). Master's students demonstrated a higher level of external regulation, bachelor's students showed a higher level of amotivation, and doctoral students demonstrated a lower level of use of the rehearsal cognitive strategy.

Qualitative data on international students' academic motivation to study at Hungarian universities, as well as their views on self-regulated learning, applying self-regulated learning strategies, and self-efficacy, were collected through semi-structured interviews. In the final phase, the merging integration procedure of a mixed-methods study was used to explain quantitative results applying qualitative findings, based on common domains and developing meta-inferences. Research offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers to attract and retain talented international students in Hungary, support their development as motivated and self-regulated learners, and contribute to knowledge development and promotion of Hungarian higher education.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Overview

To achieve its aim, this research adopts a comprehensive approach to investigate academic motivation and self-regulated learning, drawing on widely used theoretical frameworks, such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL). SDT provides a relevant theoretical background, positing that types of motivation vary according to the extent to which a student engages in an activity out of personal choice (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand, 1997). At the same time, self-regulated learning provides a broad framework encompassing numerous variables that influence learning (e.g., metacognition, self-efficacy, cognitive strategies), enabling a comprehensive, holistic approach. Based on that, SRL has become one of the most important areas of research within education (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). These frameworks provide a solid theoretical background for analyzing academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students at Hungarian universities, using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design.

Many studies on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among domestic students have been conducted, using quantitative or qualitative perspectives (Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006; Schunk & Ertmer, 2010; Pintrich, 2010; Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2004). Given the growing number of international students worldwide and in Hungary, it is significantly important to analyze their motivation to study and self-regulated learning; these findings can be used in the study program development to support students in becoming motivated, self-regulated learners, achieving higher academic performance (Schunk, 2005; Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006).

Based on previous studies, international students usually choose to study abroad for better career prospects and economic benefits (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010; Li & Bray, 2007). Where career prospects and economic benefits can be associated with extrinsic motivation, and

to be more precise, with external regulation. Concerning self-regulated learning, many studies have been performed at various levels of education (secondary and higher education), several areas (second language learning, online learning, etc.) in a qualitative or quantitative perspective among domestic students (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Carmichael & Taylor, 2005; Lane et al., 2004; Pajares, 1996, 2003; Pajares & Miller, 1994; Relich et al., 1986; Schunk, 2003). However, based on the extensive literature review, research on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students is remains limited.

Research Design and Methodology

This study aims to analyse academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students at Hungarian universities, using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design.

To address the aim of the study, the following research questions were articulated:

RQ1. What is the international students' academic motivation to study at Hungarian universities?

RQ2. What are the characteristics of self-regulated learning among international students?

RQ3. What characterizes the differences in academic motivation and self-regulation of learning among international students based on the level of study?

RQ4. What views do international students express in connection with their academic motivation?

RQ5. What views do international students express in connection with basic psychological needs, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

RQ6. What views do international students express regarding self-regulated learning while studying at Hungarian universities?

RQ7. To what extent do the qualitative interviews with international students serve to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of quantitative results on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students at Hungarian universities via integrative mixed-methods analysis?

The explanatory sequential mixed-method design made it possible to collect quantitative data on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students to provide generalizable results about two phenomena and their relation in the first phase, and then move to the qualitative questions in the second phase for a complex understanding of

participants' perspectives of the investigated phenomena. The merging integration procedure was used for integrating quantitative and qualitative data results.

Quantitative Study

Population, sample, and sampling

The population of international Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship holders in Hungary was chosen. The sampling procedure involved convenience sampling, targeting full-time international students at Hungarian universities who were scholarship holders, accessible, and willing to participate. The total number of participants in the study was 300 full-time students from different countries. Meanwhile, each level of study is equally represented – (n = 100): bachelor's, master's, doctoral students - 33.3%.

Instrument, data collection, and analysis

The quantitative phase involved self-reported questionnaires. The self-assessment questionnaire developed by Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, (2000) - Language Learning Orientations Scale (LLOS): Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation (IEA) and Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) developed by Pintrich, P. R., & Others were modified and used to answer the research questions, linking to the theoretical background. Each of the questionnaires consisted of 28 items, subdivided into seven subscales.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed online to international students studying at Hungarian universities. A total of 300 responses were collected from international students. Collected quantitative data were statistically analysed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, and descriptive statistics were applied in this study (mean, standard deviation). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to identify significant differences across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students.

Quantitative study

Population, sample, and sampling

The population of international Stipendium Hungaricum students in Hungary was chosen. Purposive sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) was necessary to follow the explanatory mixed-method design. The qualitative sample was selected from individuals who participated in the quantitative sample. This sample consisted of four male and four female international students (ages 20-48) from different Hungarian universities. The sample included two bachelor's, two master's, and four doctoral students.

Instrument, data collection, and analysis

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted via Google Meet. The data analysis confirmed that the eight interviews provided sufficient depth to reach saturation, as no new themes emerged in the transcripts. The interview data were analysed, using the first and second cycles of coding, ensured by a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). The first cycle of initial coding was conducted manually in Excel, generating 335 codes via descriptive coding techniques. Descriptive coding provides essential groundwork for second cycle coding and further analysis and interpretation in mixed-methods research (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). After categorizing data at the basic level and providing an organizational grasp of the study, the second cycle coding was performed - pattern coding. In this project, 86 codes were generated and organized into 21 categories, which were synthesized into six major concepts.

Mixed-methods analysis

Mixed-methods studies involved three types of analysis— quantitative, qualitative, and integrative mixed-methods, producing results (Guetterman & Manojlovich, 2024). For integrating at the results level, a merging integration procedure was used to explain quantitative results, using qualitative findings based on common domains, developing meta-inferences (Guetterman & Manojlovich, 2024). Joint displays represent a visual means of integrating quantitative and qualitative data, results through matrices and figures to develop meta-inferences (Guetterman, et al., 2021). The visual joint displays interpreted and explored academic motivation and self-regulated learning, and main differences, adding more insights that would not have been revealed based on quantitative or qualitative data alone (Bustamante, 2019; Peters & Fàbregues, 2023).

Results

1. The dominant type of motivation to study at Hungarian universities was motivation to get stimulation, which relates to motivation based simply on the sensations stimulated by performing the different tasks. The next dominant type of motivation was getting knowledge and exploring new ideas through studying at a Hungarian university. And then external regulation was named by students as a source of their studying activity, such as an opportunity to get a scholarship or cost of living in a foreign country, to get an international certificate of higher education, more opportunities for career development, and other tangible benefits.

Followed by identified regulation, international students invested energy in study activities because they had chosen to do so for personally relevant reasons. The next type was motivation of accomplishment. So international students attempted to master a task or achieve

their study goals. At the same time, some of the students were motivated by introjected regulation, performing study activities due to some type of pressure that had been incorporated into the self. Students in this research had different reasons, intrinsic or extrinsic, for performing the study at a Hungarian university.

2. International students actively used cognitive strategies such as elaboration and organizing strategies in their self-regulated learning. Students could relate new material to what they already know and incorporate information into long-term memory. Meanwhile, students believed in their abilities and confidently performed study actions, tried to overcome obstacles, and undertook the task in difficult settings. Also, international students could plan study time and tasks through time management, which could be essential for academic achievement while studying abroad. Students applied help-seeking, which relates to obtaining assistance from professors and other students to overcome academic challenges (Richardson et al., 2012). Students sought clarification from the professor on a particular task or learning materials. Less popular self-regulated learning strategies among international students were rehearsal and peer learning. Students relied less on simple memorization and collaboration with other students to aid their learning.

3. The results of the study demonstrated a significant difference in international students' motivation to study at a Hungarian university across different levels of study, such as bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. Master's students expressed a relatively higher level of external regulation; furthermore, bachelor's students demonstrated a relatively lighter level of amotivation. Thereby, a higher level of external regulation and amotivation could be associated with less satisfaction of basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness among bachelor's and master's students at Hungarian Universities.

Moreover, a significant difference in international students' self-regulated learning was observed across different levels of study. Doctoral students expressed a relatively lower level of using the rehearsal cognitive strategy, which represents memorizing material by repeating, compared to bachelor's and master's students. This difference might reflect the higher complexity of the tasks that doctoral students had to complete during their studies.

4. International students stated their academic motivation to study at Hungarian universities. Participants expressed intrinsic motivation to get knowledge about particular fields of study, conferences, academic writing, different cultures, academic English, stimulation, and accomplishment. Simultaneously, extrinsic motivation was also mentioned, such as identified, introjected, and external regulation. External regulation states those activities that are determined by sources external to the students, such as the costs of living in Hungary during

the study program, the opportunity to get a scholarship, receiving internationally recognized certificates of higher education, career prospects, and possibilities to travel. Besides intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which both imply the existence of intention that drives behaviours toward the goals, all students mentioned the lack of such intention due to different reasons, such as difficulties in the relationship with other members of the doctoral school, uncertainty during studying, work and study at the same time, lack of finances, lack of engagement, high expectations, and stress during the studying.

5. All interview participants mentioned autonomy, competence, and relatedness, representing the three basic psychological needs. International students experienced their behaviour as voluntary through autonomy to choose their research topic, build a curriculum, and organize their studies. Moreover, participants of the interview expressed their concerns regarding competence - their knowledge and mastery over tasks through learning, development of research, and professional skills. At the same time, international students demonstrated the need for relatedness to be involved in responsive relationships with other students and professors during their studies.

6. International students expressed their views on self-regulated learning through the use of self-regulated learning strategies and self-efficacy. Within the self-regulated learning, cognitive strategies were highlighted, such as rehearsal, elaboration, and organization. Planning was also mentioned. Students analysed the task, set goals, and plan how to reach these goals during their learning. Meanwhile, all students mentioned resource management strategies in self-regulated learning. These strategies include learning environment, time management, commitment, peer learning, and help-seeking. Students expressed self-efficacy as their belief in their abilities to complete tasks, achieve goals, and overcome difficult situations during learning.

7. The qualitative interviews with international students served to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of quantitative results on academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students at Hungarian universities via integrative mixed-methods analysis. International students were motivated to study at Hungarian universities to get knowledge that they could not get in their home countries. Also, students were motivated to study at Hungarian universities by sources external to them, such as opportunities to get internationally recognized certificates of higher education degree, opportunities to get a scholarship, and find a job after graduation, the cost of living in Hungary, and possibilities to travel during study. Meanwhile, international students applied less

collaboration with other learners due to the different academic backgrounds and English language proficiency, and difficulty in arranging peer learning and common space.

Significant differences in academic motivation and self-regulated learning among international students based on the level of study were explained by qualitative findings. Master's students were more motivated to study at Hungarian universities by sources external to them due to their focus on future career opportunities and the relatively short duration of the master's program. In contrast, bachelor's students demonstrated a higher level of amotivation, as a result of a lack of satisfaction with basic psychological needs during studies. Meanwhile, doctoral students applied less rehearsal cognitive strategy in their self-regulated learning, as they used more complex skills than memorizing. The main significant differences in academic motivation and SRL have to be considered in study programs to enhance successful academic performance among international students.

Summary

The results of the analyses suggest that international students' motivation can be reliably assessed using the intrinsic and extrinsic subtypes outlined by Deci and Ryan (1985) and Vallerand (1989; 1992). Meanwhile, all international students were intrinsically motivated at Hungarian universities. Students participated in study activities for the feelings associated with fun and excitement, exploring new ideas, and deepening their knowledge. At the same time, students' motivation was determined by sources external to them, such as an opportunity to get a scholarship or cost of living in a foreign country, to get an international certificate of higher education, more opportunities for career development, an opportunity to travel, and other tangible benefits. Interestingly, Master's students were more motivated to study by sources external to them. In contrast, bachelor's students tended to have more reasons to discontinue their studies, such as difficulties of being far from home, lack of connections, and integration. International students can be attracted to study at Hungarian universities by sources external to them, but the necessary support is required to develop and maintain intrinsic academic motivation. University support can also enhance students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness to satisfy these basic psychological needs for successful academic performance.

International students actively used SRL strategies. Students stored information in long-term memory by building internal connections between new information and prior knowledge, actively edited notes, summarized, paraphrased, and applied note-taking during study. Due to the complexity of PhD studies, doctoral students applied less rehearsal cognitive strategy, as simple memorizing could not be used for complex tasks. All students planned their study time, prioritized, avoided distractions, and organized their learning environment. Students rarely

applied a help-seeking SRL strategy, seeking clarification from the professor regarding a particular task or learning materials. Students might not have known who or how to ask for help. Students used less peer learning SRL strategy due to the different academic backgrounds, different levels of English language proficiency, lack of connections, and difficulties in organizing a common study place. As a solution, university support can enhance the use of students' SRL strategies and promote peer-learning through integration and organizing the learning environment, workshops, and training.

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Publications by the Candidate Related to the Dissertation Topic

1. Borodina, D. (2025). Students' motivations to study abroad: The case of international students at Hungarian universities. In D. Molnár & D. Molnár (Eds.), *Tavaszi Szél Konferencia / Spring Wind Conference 2025: Tanulmánykötet II.* (pp. 254–270). Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége.
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