BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY: STUDY EXPERIENCES AND POST-GRADUATION TRAJECTORIES OF NON-EU INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN LITHUANIA

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International student mobility has expanded significantly in recent years, yet the lived experiences of students in smaller and emerging destination countries remain underexplored. This article examines the trajectories of non-EU international students in Lithuania through a qualitative study based on 14 semi-structured interviews. The findings show that Lithuania is often perceived as an affordable and accessible entry point into European higher education, particularly for students whose decisions are shaped by educational aspirations, financial constraints, and future mobility plans. While participants generally evaluated their academic experiences positively, deeper social and professional integration remained uneven due to language-related barriers, limited local networks, and uncertainty regarding labour-market opportunities after graduation. The study suggests that, in an emerging destination such as Lithuania, studying abroad may offer accessible entry into European higher education, but turning those opportunities into social integration and longer-term inclusion remains challenging.

Keywords*: international student mobility; non-EU students; social integration; post-graduation trajectories*

INTRODUCTION

Early in the 2020s, international student mobility increased dramatically and has become a main characteristic of global higher education (Dias *et al.* 2021, 81; Suguku 2023; OECD 2025). The COVID-19 outbreak did not stop this trend; in reality, the number of internationally mobile tertiary-level students in Europe continued to grow and reached approximately 1.76 million in the EU by 2023 (Eurostat 2025). According to empirical studies, international students are typically motivated by a combination of intellectual, cultural, and career-oriented objectives (Abdul-Rahaman *et al.* 2022; Brooks *et al.* 2024). Many aspire to access quality education and English-taught courses that may be lacking in their own countries, as well as the opportunity for personal development through cross-cultural

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interactions (Xu *et al.* 2025; Worae and Edgerton 2023; Butrym 2020). For instance, a recent survey of the internationalisation process in higher education revealed that the top-ranked reasons for selecting a host country were the opportunity to study in English and the perceived quality of education (Apsite-Berina *et al.* 2023). A globally recognised degree is also viewed by students as a means to secure better jobs and the opportunity to work in another country (OECD 2025; Xu *et al.* 2025).

International education has become a popular way for young people to get ready for transition to adulthood by pursuing it in the hopes of obtaining better opportunities and personal growth (Chen and Li 2021). However, modern social and economic changes have made these transitions even more unpredictable (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). From a sociological point of view, this indicates, as Beck (1992) argues, that contemporary societies have shifted from an industrial era of security and clear structures to a "risk society" marked by instability, globalisation, and the need for individuals to constantly navigate new risks and uncertainties. Today's youth transitions reflect Bauman's (2000) notion of liquid modernity, which emphasises the uncertain nature of contemporary society. Research has found that linguistic and cultural differences make it challenging for international students to connect with locals, and these challenges often cause them to feel homesick, interrupt integration and doubt their own social belonging (Wahyuningsih 2020; Malay *et al.* 2023). These problems, combined with practical ones like the residence permit application process, financial concerns, and housing, add to the tension of living in another country.

While international student mobility has been widely studied in major destination countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, less attention has been paid to smaller and emerging receiving contexts within Europe. Recent OECD (2025) data show that in 2023 international students accounted for 12.7% of all tertiary students in Germany, 17.9% in the Netherlands, and 23% in the United Kingdom, compared with 10.7% in Lithuania, although Lithuania's share has grown substantially from 5.3% in 2018. Similar to other Baltic countries, Lithuania has actively internationalised its higher education system and attracted increasing numbers of foreign students, particularly from outside the European Union. At the same time, available evidence suggests that only around 5–7% of foreign graduates remain to work and live in Lithuania after completing their studies, which points to a significant gap between educational attraction and post-study retention (LRT 2024). In this sense, Lithuania is not only a national case but also an analytically useful example of how international student mobility unfolds in a smaller and emerging European destination, where educational attraction may expand faster than long-term social integration and post-study retention structures.

In this context, the study examines how non-European (non-EU) international students navigate educational opportunity, social integration, and post-graduation

uncertainty in Lithuania. Revealing non-EU international students' lived experiences in Lithuania sheds light on the factors that facilitate or hinder their social integration, and contributes to understanding their social belonging, access to opportunities, and inclusion within the host society. At the same time, there is still limited empirical research focusing specifically on non-EU international students in Lithuania and on how they connect their study experiences with future career trajectories. This case study, therefore, addresses a concrete empirical and scientific problem: how non-EU international students in Lithuania construct and negotiate their educational and life-course decisions in a context of increasing internationalisation of higher education and uncertain transitions to adulthood. The originality of the study lies in its focus on non-EU international students as a specific case, linking three interrelated stages of their trajectories: (1) the decision to study in Lithuania, (2) their academic and social experiences during studies, and (3) their post-graduation aspirations and transition pathways, including possible employment in Lithuania, onward mobility, or return to the country of origin. By bringing these stages together within a single qualitative case study, the article connects empirical findings with sociological concepts, including human capital, social and cultural capital, acculturation, and youth transitions.

In this respect, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do international students from non-EU countries decide to study in Lithuania?
2. How do they experience and negotiate their academic and social life as international students in Lithuania?
3. How do they formulate expectations towards higher education and picture or experience their post-graduation transition pathways?

In this article, integration is conceptualised as a processual and relational phenomenon that unfolds during the study period rather than a permanent settlement. Since international students often experience mobility as temporary and open-ended, settlement-oriented assumptions do not fully capture the character of their trajectories (Smith and Khawaja 2011; Erturk, Oker, and Nguyen Luu 2021). The analysis therefore focuses on four dimensions: academic integration within the university environment, in line with higher-education research on students' participation in institutional and social life; sociocultural adaptation in everyday life; social belonging and interaction, especially the formation of meaningful ties with residents and other students (Rivas, Burke, and Hale 2019); and transition-oriented incorporation, referring to access to work-related networks and post-graduation opportunity structures. Accordingly, the article is less concerned with full integration than with uneven experiences of adaptation, participation, and belonging during a temporary but highly consequential period of mobility.

This study provides an in-depth, student-centred perspective on international higher education in a national context that is often overlooked in the literature on student mobility. While much of the existing research focuses on larger destination

countries or on macro-level policy frameworks (Dias *et al.* 2021; Caruso and de Wit 2015; OECD 2025), far less attention has been paid to how non-EU international students themselves experience studying and living in Lithuania and how they understand their future opportunities (IOM Vilnius 2018). By examining their motivations, everyday experiences, and imagined futures, the article contributes empirical evidence to debates on human capital, youth transitions, and social integration, and it enriches the limited body of qualitative research on international students in the Baltic region. The article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework and literature review; this is followed by the methodology section, which presents the case study design, sample, and analytical approach. The subsequent sections discuss the findings organised around three themes, and the final section offers conclusions and implications for policy and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study brings together four connected perspectives: human capital, social and cultural capital, academic and social integration, and youth transitions under conditions of uncertainty. Human capital theory explains why international education is often pursued as an investment in future employability and mobility (Becker 1964). At the same time, social and cultural capital perspectives show that the value of this investment depends on students' ability to mobilise networks, linguistic resources, and institutional familiarity in the host context (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988). This is especially important in the case of international students, whose experiences cannot be fully understood through settlement-oriented notions of integration, since their mobility is often temporary, strategic, and open-ended. For this reason, concepts such as sociocultural adaptation and sense of belonging offer a more precise way of analysing how students navigate everyday life, form relationships, and experience inclusion or distance in the host society (Smith and Khawaja 2011; Rivas, Burke, and Hale 2019; Erturk, Oker, and Nguyen Luu 2021). These processes also unfold within broader youth transitions marked by uncertainty, where educational, occupational, and mobility pathways are increasingly non-linear and shaped by risk, flexibility, and changing opportunity structures (Beck 1992; Bauman 2000; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). These perspectives help explain why non-EU students choose Lithuania, how they experience academic and social life during their studies, and how they imagine their post-graduation trajectories.

International student mobility is often interpreted through the lens of human capital theory, which views education as an investment aimed at enhancing future employability, income and career prospects (Becker 1964). For many young people, studying abroad represents a strategy to acquire internationally recognised credentials and to accumulate not only economic but also social and cultural capital

(Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Existing research on international students has shown that motives such as academic quality, English-taught programs, and perceived advantages in global labour markets are central to the decision to study abroad (Dias *et al.* 2021; Apsite-Berina *et al.* 2023; Brooks *et al.* 2024). At the same time, contemporary youth transitions take place in what Beck (1992) calls a "risk society" and what Bauman (2000) describes as "liquid modernity", conditions marked by uncertainty, flexibilisation and individualised responsibility for managing one's life course. International students make educational decisions and plan their futures in a context where stable career paths are increasingly less guaranteed. Research has documented that international students frequently face unpredictable transitions, including precarious employment, changing migration regulations, and the need to constantly adapt to new circumstances (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Butrym 2020).

The experiences of studying and living abroad are also shaped by processes of acculturation and integration into the host society. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework highlights different strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalisation) that migrants may adopt, depending on their own preferences and the openness of the host context. For international students, limited language skills, perceived cultural distance and weak connections with local communities can hinder deeper integration and produce acculturative stress (Castles and Miller 2009; Wahyuningsih 2020; Malay *et al.* 2023; Nasir and Mustapha 2020). These challenges are often intensified for non-EU students who face stricter migration regimes and may have more difficulties entering the local labour market. Finally, transition theory emphasises the role of resources, coping strategies, and support in shaping individuals' adaptation to major life changes, such as moving abroad or entering employment (Schlossberg 1981). For international students, studying abroad can be a transformative learning experience that strengthens intercultural competencies and self-efficacy, but only if they can mobilise adequate social networks and institutional support (Coleman 1988; Abdul-Rahaman *et al.* 2022; Worae and Edgerton 2023).

Many European countries have purposely prioritised the internationalisation of higher education to attract international talent (Dias *et al.* 2021; Brooks *et al.* 2024). Particularly in the Baltic countries, such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, where higher education institutions ambitiously seek to attract foreign students (IOM Vilnius 2018; LSM 2024). The Baltic states best illustrate this change, and particularly in Lithuania, the proportion of international students has seen a notable increase over the past decade (LRT 2024). Furthermore, Lithuania has experienced a steady increase in foreign students enrolling in its institutions, particularly from non-European countries. High-quality education, reasonable prices, and opportunities to access European labour markets define the attraction for these students. *Table no. 1* presents the number of foreign students in Lithuanian universities by broad regional categories of citizenship. As the table shows, the

total number increased substantially from 6,922 in 2020–2021 to 11,560 in 2024–2025 (OSP 2025). Their presence enhances the academic landscape and contributes to Lithuania's economy.

Table no. 1

Foreign nationals studying at universities in Lithuania

	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024	2024–2025
Total by citizenship	6922	7883	9467	9101	11,560
Europe	3589	2211	3356	4897	5,802
European Union	1497	1653	1765	1753	1,869
Africa	670	877	802	696	1,005
The Americas	162	208	209	195	202
Australia, Oceania	14	15	12	N/A	N/A
Asia	2521	2958	3388	3304	4,543

Source: Oficialiosios Statistikos Portalas (OSP 2025)
https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=248e6342-3e95-4c1a-8a3c-4015b7f2360d#/

As the *Table no. 1* shows, the total number increased substantially between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. This growth is consistent with broader OECD data showing that the share of international students in Lithuania rose from 5.3% in 2018 to 10.7% in 2023, indicating a clear expansion of internationalisation in higher education (OECD 2025). At the same time, available evidence suggests that only around 5–7% of foreign graduates remain in Lithuania to work after graduation, which means that increasing enrolment does not automatically translate into strong local retention (LRT 2024). In this respect, Lithuania appears not only as a study destination but also as an emerging retention challenge.

Existing studies in the Baltic states primarily focus on policy frameworks and institutional strategies for attracting and retaining foreign students (Urbanovič, Wilkins, and Huisman 2016; IOM Vilnius 2018; Apsite-Berina *et al.* 2023). While these studies provide an important macro-level perspective, there is still a lack of qualitative research that captures in-depth how international students from non-EU countries themselves understand their experiences and future opportunities in Lithuania. This article contributes to filling this gap by presenting a qualitative case study based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, focusing on the trajectories of non-EU international students from their decision to study in Lithuania through their academic and social experiences to their post-graduation aspirations and transition pathways.

METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as a qualitative case study focusing on the lived experiences of international students in Lithuania. A case study approach was selected as the guiding methodology, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific group within its real-life context and the significant meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Patton 2014; Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun 2018). This approach is well-suited to the study's aim of capturing international students' subjective realities in Lithuania, as it focuses on providing a holistic description of their experiences without preconceived assumptions. By emphasising participants' own perspectives, a qualitative case study provides valuable insights into common themes and nuances that distinguish being a non-EU international student in a foreign country (Smith and Fieldsend 2021).

Sample and data collection. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to reflect on their decision to study abroad, their experiences as students in Lithuania, and their plans. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Initial participants were reached through the researcher's academic and professional contacts in higher education settings in Lithuania, including contacts established via social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Additional participants were then recruited through snowball sampling. These initial contacts served only as access points for recruitment and did not shape the content of the interviews. The sample consisted of 14 participants from non-EU countries, aged between 21 and 32 years, comprising 7 male and 7 female individuals to ensure gender balance. They comprised 10 recent graduates and 4 current students enrolled in or recently graduated from bachelor's and master's programmes at Lithuanian higher education institutions. Sample adequacy was assessed in terms of thematic depth and recurrence rather than numerical representativeness. The sample size was considered adequate for this qualitative case study because it combined variation in participants' backgrounds with sufficient depth of interview material, while recurring patterns emerged across the interviews in relation to destination choice, social integration, language-related barriers, and post-graduation uncertainty. To reduce the risk of indirect identification, participant characteristics in *Table no. 2* are presented in a simplified form, with broader region-of-origin categories and age groups used instead of more specific personal identifiers. This variation in participants' cultural backgrounds, study levels, and academic fields was intentional, as it allowed for a broader understanding of international students' trajectories from enrolment through post-graduation and early transition to the labour market.

The rationale for selecting the target group as students from non-EU countries is that, compared to locals and EU citizens, non-EU citizens face greater difficulties in integrating into Lithuanian society. For example, the main difficulties

faced by non-EU citizens include applying for work permits and residence permit regulations, securing long-term accommodation, language barriers, cultural differences within the EU, discrimination, prejudice, and a lack of professional networks (Sommarribas and Nienaber 2021). Moreover, they may face financial challenges, including higher tuition fees for international students and limited access to financial support systems available to EU citizens. By focusing on this group, the study aims to shed light on the specific experiences, challenges, and aspirations of young people from non-EU countries as they navigate their integration into Lithuanian society.

Table no. 2

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Code	Gender	Age group	Region of origin	University	Level	Field of Study	City of residence
P1	M	25–29	West Asia	VU	Bachelor	International Business	Vilnius
P2	F	21–24	Eastern Europe	VMU	Bachelor	Culture and Communication	Kaunas
P3	M	21–24	Eastern Europe	VMU	Bachelor	Culture and Communication	Kaunas
P4	M	21–24	West Asia	MRU	Bachelor	Psychology	Vilnius
P5	F	21–24	West Asia	VMU	Master	Education Management	Kaunas
P6	F	30+	East Africa	VMU	Master	Social Work	Kaunas
P7	M	30+	South Asia	VU	Master	Mathematics and Informatics	Vilnius
P8	F	30+	South Asia	KU	Master	Business Management	Klaipėda
P9	F	21–24	Eastern Europe	VU	Bachelor	International Relations and Political Science	Vilnius
P10	F	21–24	West Asia	MRU	Bachelor	Psychology	Vilnius
P11	M	21–24	Central Asia	VMU	Bachelor	English Philology	Vilnius
P12	F	25–29	West Africa	VMU	Master	Business Logistics	Kaunas
P13	M	21–24	Eastern Europe	VMU	Master	Molecular Biology and Biotechnology	Vilnius
P14	M	30+	Central Asia	KVK	Bachelor	General Practice Nursing	Klaipėda

Fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2024. All interviews were carried out remotely online via Zoom and were recorded with

participants' consent. Most interviews were conducted in English. However, four interviews were conducted in Turkish at the request of participants whose mother tongue was Turkish and with whom the researcher could communicate in Turkish. All interviews were transcribed manually, and translation into English was performed by the author. This procedure ensured consistency in coding, analysis, and the presentation of quotations in the manuscript. The interview guide included questions on three main topics consistent with the research questions: (1) motivations and decision-making processes related to choosing Lithuania, (2) academic, social, and everyday experiences during studies, and (3) expectations towards higher education and imagined future careers and integration.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed about the aim of the study, the use of interview data, and their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Oral informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each video-recorded interview. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were anonymised by assigning coded identifiers (P1–P14), and identifying details were reduced in the presentation of participant characteristics and quotations.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity with the material, after which initial codes were generated across the dataset. These codes were then compared and grouped into broader patterns related to participants' motivations for choosing Lithuania, their experiences of social integration, and their post-graduation trajectories. Although the research questions and interview guide shaped the broad areas of inquiry, the coding process remained grounded in participants' accounts, and the final themes were refined through repeated engagement with the data. The analysis should therefore be understood as thematic analysis combining data-driven coding with research-question-guided thematic organisation. Through this iterative process, three overarching themes were identified: (1) choosing Lithuania as a study destination, (2) academic life and social integration in Lithuania, and (3) career expectations and transition. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, coding and theme development were discussed with colleagues, and constant comparison between the data and emerging themes was applied.

Limitations

Regarding certain limitations of the study, the sample of 14 participants, who have diverse backgrounds from non-EU countries, is relatively small and focused

on students from a single host country, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences captured are specific to Lithuania and the time of the study; different cohorts or host countries may provide complementary perspectives. Furthermore, participation in the study was voluntary, so those with particularly strong positive or negative experiences may have been overrepresented. For these reasons, the study does not claim to represent all non-EU international students in Lithuania; instead, it provides an in-depth, qualitative insight into a specific case. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable contributions to the international student mobility literature (Bagdonavičiūtė and Lasauskienė 2018; Sun 2020; Saulius and Malinauskas 2025) by presenting experiences of international students in Lithuania and linking them to broader sociological debates on youth transitions and integration.

FINDINGS

The findings show that studying in Lithuania as an emerging destination context involves not only educational mobility, but also an uneven process of converting academic opportunity into social integration and post-graduation prospects. The findings identify three overarching themes: (1) Choosing Lithuania as a study destination, (2) Academic and sociocultural adaptation, and (3) Career expectations and transition. Taken together, these themes show how international education in an emerging destination context functions as both an opportunity structure and a site of uncertainty, where students' educational investments do not automatically translate into deeper social integration or stable post-graduation prospects. The following subsections present each theme in turn, illustrating how participants make sense of their choices and experiences.

CHOOSING LITHUANIA AS A STUDY DESTINATION

The first theme captures how participants explained not only their wish to study abroad, but also their decision to choose Lithuania specifically. Participants' accounts suggest that Lithuania was an attractive and affordable entry point into European higher education, especially for students seeking English-taught programmes, lower living costs, scholarship opportunities, and a degree with broader European value. In this sense, Lithuania was often evaluated pragmatically in comparison with more expensive or less accessible destinations. For many participants, studying in Lithuania was associated not only with obtaining a degree but also with improving future employability, gaining international experience, and keeping open the possibility of onward mobility after graduation. This reflects the idea that students seek to accumulate valuable cultural, social, and economic capital through international education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Key factors

influencing their decisions included family encouragement, an interest in new cultural experiences, and the appeal of a European education system. For some participants, long-standing aspirations to "go abroad" combined with economic considerations and the perceived value of a European degree:

> *"I was accepted to a university in Paris, but I lost the scholarship and the costs were simply too high. Lithuania offered a state scholarship that covered my tuition and gave a monthly grant, and the cost of living here seemed much more manageable, so I decided to come." (P5, female, West Asia)*

> *"For me the most attractive thing was that it's in Europe, a European degree is recognised almost everywhere, but Lithuania is much more affordable than countries like Germany or the UK, so it felt like a realistic way to get that European education." (P9, female, Eastern Europe)*

Participants indicated that the idea of studying in Europe carried significant appeal, whether due to the perceived quality of education, international recognition of a European degree, or future career opportunities. Lithuania was not often the first country that came to mind, but it emerged as an attractive option due to its affordability compared to other European countries, both in terms of tuition fees and living costs. Moreover, safety and size were further attractions for students who typically regarded Lithuania as a secure, green, and calm country. These accounts suggest that Lithuania was often chosen less as a final destination in itself than as a feasible and meaningful route into European higher education under conditions of limited financial and institutional resources.

ACADEMIC LIFE AND SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION

The second theme focuses on how international students experienced their academic and everyday adaptation in Lithuania. Participants' studying experiences in Lithuanian universities were generally positive in terms of the learning environment. Many interviewees praised certain aspects of education quality. Common positive remarks included smaller class sizes and more approachable professors than they were used to in their home countries. These comparisons suggest that studying in Lithuania met or even exceeded expectations regarding the academic environment, offering updated knowledge, better access to resources, and a less stressful, more interactive learning experience. For instance, several students contrasted Lithuanian higher education with systems in their home countries, emphasising smaller groups and more interactive learning:

> *"Here, the classes are way smaller. It feels almost intimate for us, many classes were just conversations with the lecturer. In my country, it's big lecture halls and you cannot really discuss anything." (P6, female, Africa)*

"In my bachelor's at home, we had huge groups and many field trips, but it was very teacher-centred. In Lithuania, teachers give you a topic and then a lot of reading; you take more responsibility yourself. At first, I didn't read everything in detail, but it pushes you to be more independent." (P8, female, South Asia)

"I needed an English-speaking environment for English philology. In Kazakhstan, we mostly use Kazakh or Russian, but here, with so many international students, you actually use English all the time, and many professors studied in Canada or other countries. That really helps to develop." (P11, male, Central Asia)

Outside the classroom, international students faced the reality of integrating into a new society. Participants reported that the environment was generally welcoming and English-language friendly in daily interactions. Many noted that it was quite possible to communicate in English, as universities conduct programs in English, and the internationalisation level of young generations in Lithuania was high. The ubiquity of English was cited as an advantage: unlike some other countries in Western Europe, Lithuania did not require international students to immediately learn the local language to navigate everyday life. This relatively smooth linguistic adaptation helped students focus on their studies and build international friendships. Several participants celebrated the multicultural campus atmosphere, where they could meet peers from Europe, Asia, Africa, and beyond.

"If you live in a country, you have a chance to experience the culture deeply… You have a chance to meet other international people as well… This makes you a rounded person…" (P5, female, West Asia)

This aspect of being an international student highlights that building a global social network was frequently mentioned as a positive, life-enriching outcome of studying in Lithuania. On the other hand, the most challenging step was deeper integration into local society for international students. A common theme was the feeling of being an "outsider" as described as a minority in the host society. Participants described difficulty in forming meaningful relationships with local Lithuanians. One student who lives in Klaipėda, which is a smaller city than Vilnius and Kaunas, noted that "it took time to adapt" and that he ultimately moved to the capital, where there is a larger international community (P14). Others mentioned they found Lithuanians polite but somewhat reserved, making it hard to socialise freely.

"I come from a big capital city, so when I moved to Klaipėda it was difficult at first… in winter it's very quiet, almost no people outside. Later, I moved to Vilnius because I needed more people, more international atmosphere, more sounds in the city." (P14, male, Central Asia)

A few participants mentioned financial challenges they encountered during their stay. The cost of living in Lithuania, while lower than in Western Europe, was still a concern for students on tight budgets. Inflation and currency differences could strain students' finances, particularly if their families were from economies with weaker currencies. Working part-time was an option some pursued to cover their expenses, but balancing work and study added to their stress. Generally, Lithuania is not among the most expensive destinations; however, for non-EU students who often pay full tuition fees, financial pressure is a significant disadvantage.

> *"When I first came, everything was very cheap… now prices have all increased, you can feel the inflation." (P6, female, Africa).*

Several participants described periods of homesickness, especially during the first year and around holidays, when they missed home cuisine, everyday routines, and the comfort of their own cultural environment. This emotional challenge was particularly acute during the initial year and around holidays. "Memleket hasreti", which is a Turkish term for longing for one's homeland, was very real, noted one student (P1). He shared that seeing people from his own country on campus would immediately cheer him up because it eased the feeling of being a stranger. While homesickness is a common issue for international students everywhere, its presence in our data underscores the need for supportive networks (friends, mentors) to help students cope.

> *"Adapting to a new culture takes time. You want to see someone from your own culture… Of course, you miss your family. You are a foreigner in the country…" (P1, male, West Asia).*

Importantly, this sentiment of initial social isolation or requiring long periods to truly connect with locals was echoed by others, especially those from more collectivist cultures. It is worth noting that some students took proactive steps to integrate by joining clubs, sports teams, or church groups, which they said helped somewhat (P9, female, joined a church community; P13, male, made local friends through his work). Yet for most participants, adaptation remained partial and uneven: although they built strong ties within international student networks, sustained relationships with local Lithuanians, and a broader sense of belonging in the host society were less developed. They tended to operate their work within an international student "bubble." This reflects a well-known challenge in international education: without conscious inclusion efforts, students from abroad often stick together and struggle to penetrate local social circles.

Despite the challenges, participants identified clear advantages in their student experience in Lithuania. Nearly all valued the opportunity to meet people from various countries and build an international network of friends. They felt that being part of a multicultural student community broadened their horizons and

interpersonal skills. Forming friendships with other internationals was seen as enriching both socially and professionally. Living abroad in a relatively safe and student-friendly environment gave participants a strong sense of independence. This independence helped students develop life skills, resilience, and confidence. Being responsible for one's own decisions in a foreign country was described by many as a character-building experience. These accounts illustrate a pattern that resembles Berry's (1997) notion of partial integration: students develop strong ties within international networks and gain independence, yet their connections with the local society remain limited, which has implications for their longer-term integration.

CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND TRANSITION

The third theme addresses how participants imagined their post-graduation futures and navigated the transition from education to employment. For some, this involved attempts to enter the Lithuanian labour market; for others, it involved uncertainty, onward mobility, or the possibility of return. It also shows how their hopes for upward mobility confront structural barriers in the Lithuanian labour market, including limited networks, language requirements, and scarce structured internships. While a few saw promising opportunities, most encountered significant obstacles, leading some to alter their career paths or consider leaving the country. This also has implications for the host country, as the expansion of international student recruitment may produce only partial long-term benefits if internationally trained graduates are not retained in the local labour market.

A critical finding is that many felt their study programs did not adequately prepare them for the Lithuanian labour market or were not fully aligned with market needs. This mismatch manifests in a few ways. First, participants observed that they gained knowledge and skills in their programs; however, they often lacked local experience or professional networks by the time of graduation. For example, internship opportunities were scarce or not built into their curricula. Without internships or traineeship experience, students had little chance of securing a job in companies, making it quite difficult to find a job from scratch in a foreign country. Recognising the importance of connections in the Lithuanian job market, many participants tried to network their way into jobs. They used platforms like LinkedIn, attended networking events they could, and tapped into both international and local communities.

> *"Honestly, after I graduated, I tried to apply for professional jobs. I made profiles on all the Lithuanian job sites and applied through LinkedIn, but I almost never got invited to interviews. Even for entry-level positions, I received formal rejection emails without any explanation. At some point,*

I realised that without permanent residence, companies simply didn't want the extra paperwork." (P8, female, South Asia)

"The main challenge is language. For teaching jobs, I can find something quite easily, but for HR positions, they always require C1-level Lithuanian. It's understandable because you work with staff, but for internationals, it closes many doors. Sometimes I'm rejected, and when I ask for feedback, they just don't answer." (P5, female, West Asia)

These statements show that, for many participants, entry into the Lithuanian labour market was shaped not only by qualifications, but also by structural barriers such as residence-related employer reluctance and Lithuanian language requirements. In this sense, formal educational achievement did not automatically translate into professional access. Others shared experiences of accepting survival jobs that did not match their qualifications:

"For some time after graduation, I was just staying in the dorm, not finding anything. I took a job in a restaurant kitchen, standing on my feet for eight hours washing dishes. Then they told me I should also clean the toilets in the same uniform and go back to the kitchen. I felt they were taking advantage because I was a foreigner, so I quit after a few days." (P12, female, Africa)

This example illustrates how limited access to professional opportunities could push graduates into survival jobs that did not match their qualifications, revealing the fragile link between educational mobility and upward labour-market mobility. These difficulties sometimes pushed graduates to consider onward migration:

"Lithuania gave me my degree, but when I looked at salaries and opportunities, I saw I could earn more with the same skills in countries like Germany or the UK. It's similar to what happens in Ukraine, people go to Poland for better pay, and then Polish people move further west. So you start thinking whether to stay or move on." (P3, male, Eastern Europe)

For some participants, these constraints made onward migration appear more rational than long-term settlement in Lithuania, which further supports the view that Lithuania functioned for some as one stage within a broader mobility trajectory. At the same time, some participants managed to build careers in Lithuania.

"There were no structured internship placements, so I had to be very proactive. The university sent an email about a funded traineeship programme for foreign graduates, four months with a 600-euro grant. I really wanted to be at the International Organisation for Migration, but they didn't reply to my emails. I ended up calling people directly and insisting on

my case. Only then did they consider me, and that traineeship turned into a longer-term position." (P6, female, Africa)

"At some point, I was sending 10–15 applications a day and getting rejections. Finally, a friend referred me to an international financial company. I did the assessment, passed the interview, and they agreed to help renew my residence permit. Without that reference and their support for the documents, I probably would have had to return home." (P12, female, Africa)

These statements show that more positive outcomes were usually associated with exceptional persistence, targeted traineeship opportunities, or strong networking efforts rather than with smooth institutional transition from study to work. Over time, those who stayed longer term in Lithuania found the opportunity to invest heavily in expanding their networks, essentially doing on their own what robust career services or internship programs might have facilitated. The post-graduation transition, therefore, reveals a gap between educational investment and locally usable opportunity structures, showing that human capital alone is insufficient without language competence, networks, and institutional pathways into employment. These experiences suggest that, without stronger institutional support and clearer pathways from study to work, the potential human capital that international students develop in Lithuania may remain only partially utilised in the host country.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The focus on non-EU international students is analytically important because their trajectories are shaped by structural conditions that differ from those affecting EU students. In addition to academic and social adaptation, they often face stronger administrative and labour-market barriers related to residence status, post-study employment opportunities, and host-country language requirements. The study therefore suggests that the value of international education for non-EU students depends not only on access to higher education, but also on whether this educational experience can be converted into social belonging, legal security, and viable employment pathways after graduation. Non-EU international students are driven by goals such as acquiring a quality education, enhancing their language proficiency, and discovering new cultures as they embark on their path with a great deal of optimism and perseverance. These motivations align strongly with the principles of human capital theory, which considers higher education as a strategic investment aimed at enhancing future employability and earning globally recognised educational credentials (Becker 1964). Many developed intercultural skills and autonomy, and they found the Lithuanian academic system to be contemporary and student-centred. This development of cross-cultural adaptability

and self-efficacy resonates with the transformative learning experiences often associated with international mobility. These positive outcomes emphasise that studying abroad may significantly improve a person's social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988).

At the same time, most participants reported limited involvement in local social life beyond the university and international student circles, which points to uneven inclusion in the host society. These arguments show inconsistent sociocultural adaptation rather than a deliberate choice of "marginalisation." Most participants remained closely connected to co-national or international networks, while their ties with local society were more limited, especially where language barriers and few opportunities for sustained contact with locals constrained broader participation (Berry 1997; Smith and Khawaja 2011; Rivas, Burke, and Hale 2019). Language emerged as a double-edged sword, meaning that while English allowed for basic communication, the lack of Lithuanian proficiency became a barrier to deeper societal and professional integration. This emphasises the critical role of host-country language proficiency as a key determinant of successful acculturation and as a crucial component of human capital for local employment (Castles and Miller 2009). The disparity between pre-arrival expectations and post-arrival realities also reflects an interplay of push-pull factors, where initial "pulls" (*e.g.*, European education) are later counteracted by unforeseen "pushes" (*e.g.*, rising living costs, being away from home, integration difficulties) (Schoorl *et al.* 2000).

The findings suggest that post-graduation outcomes are more favourable when non-EU international students are able to build language skills, social and professional networks, and work-related experience during their studies. For instance, learning the local language, making social and professional networks, and having work, traineeship, or volunteering experiences during studies can significantly impact post-graduation success. This emphasis on proactive engagement aligns with transition theory (Schlossberg 1981), which posits that individuals who actively seek support and develop strategies are more successful in transitioning to significant life changes. Furthermore, the results underscore the importance of fostering a diverse atmosphere, providing academic and career guidance, and helping students' goals become tangible successes. Such initiatives are necessary for translating the commitment to international mobility into positive academic outcomes and smoother school-to-work transitions for young generations (OECD 2025; Xu *et al.* 2025).

In light of the research aim, the findings suggest that navigating integration and transition in an emerging host context means simultaneously investing in one's future and managing multiple forms of uncertainty. Participants see Lithuania as a gateway to high-quality European higher education and potentially to wider European labour markets. At the same time, they often experience limited integration into local society, financial pressures, and unclear career prospects. Their trajectories thus combine upward aspirations with everyday negotiations of

risk, belonging, and opportunity in a specific national context. Taken together, the findings suggest that the Lithuanian case illustrates a broader pattern relevant to smaller and emerging destination EU countries: international education may offer accessible entry into European higher education, but the conversion of that opportunity into social integration and long-term retention remains uneven. In this sense, the article contributes not only to understanding student experiences in Lithuania, but also to broader debates on the opportunities and limits of internationalisation in secondary destination contexts.

While this study is not designed as a direct comparison between EU and non-EU students, it shows that the experiences of non-EU students must be understood in relation to a distinct set of mobility and integration constraints. Although based on a small qualitative case study, a comprehensive understanding of non-EU international students' experiences can help host institutions and policymakers create an environment not only for study but also for successful integration and transition to adulthood/labour market. This, in turn, contributes to the host country's academic vibrancy and long-term economic development, ensuring a positive return on investment for both human capital and broader internationalisation efforts.

AI Use Disclosure

During the major revision of this manuscript, following peer-review feedback, the author utilised ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a supportive language and editing tool to improve clarity, structure, and phrasing, and to help organise responses to reviewers. All content was reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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Mobilitatea internațională a studenților s-a extins semnificativ în ultimii ani, însă experiențele trăite ale studenților din țări de destinație mai mici și emergente rămân insuficient explorate. Acest articol examinează traiectoriile studenților internaționali non-UE în Lituania, printr-un studiu calitativ bazat pe 14 interviuri semi-structurate. Rezultatele arată că Lituania este adesea percepută ca un punct de acces accesibil către învățământul superior european, în special pentru studenții ale căror decizii sunt modelate de aspirații educaționale, constrângeri financiare și planuri viitoare de mobilitate. Deși participanții au evaluat în general pozitiv experiențele lor academice, integrarea socială și profesională mai profundă a rămas inegală din cauza barierelor lingvistice, a rețelelor locale limitate și a incertitudinii privind oportunitățile de pe piața muncii după absolvire. Studiul sugerează că, într-o destinație emergentă precum Lituania, studiul în străinătate poate oferi un acces mai facil la învățământul superior european, însă transformarea acestor oportunități în integrare socială și incluziune pe termen mai lung rămâne dificilă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *mobilitatea internațională a studenților; studenți non-UE; integrare socială; traiectorii post-absolvire.*

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