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Acculturation Strategies and Perceptions of Academic Success Among Sri Lankan International Higher Education Students in New Zealand

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of acculturation strategies on the perceived academic success of Sri Lankan students enrolled in higher education study programs in New Zealand. Employing Berry's acculturation model, the study examined the following strategies: integration, marginalisation, assimilation and separation to understand their impact on perceived academic success. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach was used, and the analysis revealed that engaging with both Sri Lankan and New Zealand academic cultures or adopting integration strategy was most frequently used and resulted in the highest levels of perceived academic success. While adoption of the marginalisation strategy was extremely rare in the sample, all strategies other than integration were found to result in a lower level of perceived academic success. The study highlights the importance of institutional support, such as culturally inclusive programs, mentoring, and counselling services in promoting successful integration.

***Keywords**:* Acculturation strategies; perceived academic success; integration; cultural adaptation; institutional support

Introduction

Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change resulting from interaction between and meeting of different cultures (Berry, 1980, 2005, 2008). This process influences different aspects of a student's life, starting with academic success and ending with processes of social adaptation and psychological well-being (Aquino, 2021; Luo et al., 2019; Mustafa et al., 2020). With the growing number of students engaged in international education worldwide, it is important to understand the acculturation strategies that best facilitate academic success. This research explores the acculturation strategies adopted by Sri Lankan students in New Zealand and identifies the extent to which alternative methods of cultural adjustment influence perceived academic success.

Acculturation refers to the process followed by an individual in adapting to a new cultural environment (Lai et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020). Considering the cultural differences between Sri Lanka and New Zealand post-secondary educational environments (Nanayakkara, 2018), this study focuses on identifying the most frequently chosen academic acculturation strategies and investigates how different acculturation strategies affect the perceived academic success of Sri Lankan international students. In a recent study of the relative proportions of international students in New Zealand universities, Sri Lanka represented the 6th highest number of international students in New Zealand – approximately 4500 students (Ministry of Education, 2026). The enrolment (and ongoing academic success) of international university students contributes to the New Zealand economy, both during their studies and also as employees following graduation (Sawir et al., 2009). As such, international students are crucial, both in terms of the financial benefits as well as their educational and cultural contributions to host nations, including New Zealand (Luo, 2023). However, the transition of students from a traditional education system in Sri Lanka that places heavy

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emphasis on rote learning or memorising of key facts (Mayer, 2002) and teacher-centred instructions (Bishri, 2023; Niles, 1996), to New Zealand's tertiary educational system could be challenging for them. New Zealand institutions aim to be learner centred (Leach et al., 2014), prioritising interactive learning, and development of critical thinking skills (Mehta, 2015). Therefore, Sri Lankan students might face difficulties in adapting to different expectations around class learning styles, group work, and independent study (Drozdova, 2025). Thus, our study provides an ideal opportunity to investigate the academic acculturation strategies adopted by Sri Lankan students and identify the strategies that facilitate their perceived academic success in New Zealand.

Acculturation Strategies

In this study, acculturation strategies were conceptualised based on John Berry's (1980, 2005, 2008) acculturation model (referred to henceforth as Berry's model) which identifies four primary strategies:

- **Integration**: Individuals maintain their original cultural identity while also participating in daily interactions with the new culture.
- **Assimilation**: Individuals fully embrace the new culture engaging with it, often at the expense of their original cultural heritage and identity.
- **Separation**: Individuals retain their original cultural identity and values but avoid interaction with the new culture.
- **Marginalisation**: Individuals maintain little possibility or interest in interaction with both the original and the new culture.

Academic Success

In this study, academic success refers to students' own perceptions of their academic progress, confidence, and adjustment within the New Zealand higher education environment, rather than objective indicators such as grades or completion outcomes. Examining how different acculturation strategies shape these perceptions provides insight into the factors that support or hinder students' self-reported sense of academic achievement.

Research Questions

1. What acculturation strategies are most commonly adopted by Sri Lankan students in New Zealand?
2. Which of these acculturation strategies predict the success of their perceived academic achievement?
3. What recommendations can be made to support the self-reported academic success of Sri Lankan university students based on their chosen acculturation strategies?

Theoretical Framework - Berry's Model

According to Berry, in the acculturation process, one is compelled to answer two major questions: primarily, (1) the degree to which the person desires to continue acting in conformity with his or her original culture and, secondly, (2) the extent to which one wishes to relate themselves to the host culture. Answers to the two questions become the core basis for determining an individual's likely acculturation strategy. Click or tap here to enter text. Based on the answers to these questions, Berry's model identifies four different strategies for acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation.

Integration

In this strategy, integration occurs when individuals wish to maintain their original cultural identity while having contact with the host culture. This strategy is often put forward as the most frequently adopted one and associated with positive psychological outcomes, such as higher levels of well-being and social support levels (Berry, 2005). Adopters of an integration strategy usually have less accumulative stress and are more successful in living between two cultures. This method also allows people to retain some strong identity with their heritage while, at the same time, maintain access to opportunities and means in the host society (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Marginalisation

Marginalisation is characterised by the rejection of both the original and host cultures. Individuals who adopt this strategy may feel disconnected from their heritage while also failing to identify with the host culture (Berry, 2008). Marginalisation is often associated with negative psychological outcomes, including feelings of alienation, identity confusion, and low self-esteem

(Phinney et al., 2001). It is usually considered the least frequently adopted strategy, as it provides less of these resources for coping with problems encountered in the process of acculturation and possibly worsens their feelings of social isolation and acculturative stress (Makarova & Birman, 2015; Shen, 2023).

Assimilation

Assimilation involves individuals fully adopting the host culture, often at the expense of their original cultural identity. Through assimilation, an individual might try to decrease differences between the self and the dominant group, including loss of a native language, traditions, and customs. On the other hand, assimilation leads to belongingness within the host culture. Simultaneously, alienation from one's original culture is possible, and in some cases, it can be related to identity clashes and result in psychological distress (Phinney et al., 2001).

Separation

Separation happens when individuals prefer to maintain their original cultural identity over and above interacting with the host culture. Individuals who prefer to preserve their heritage and not be affected by the influence of the host society choose this strategy (Berry, 2005). While separation would show a strong sense of cultural continuity and community support, it would also promote social isolation and reduce opportunities for integration into the host society (Sam & Berry, 2010). Separation is likely to lead to more acculturative stressors, mostly in societies where cultural differences are marginalised (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Acculturation and Academic Success

One of the main determining factors in the academic experience of international students is acculturation. The process of adjusting to a new cultural environment includes not only cultural and psychological adjustment but also requisite abilities to move successfully through the host's educational system (Bethel et al., 2020; Morisano et al., 2010; Tinto, 1997).

How acculturation can better explain educational achievement is based on the degree to which students adopt effectively the host society's cultural and social norms. Based upon Berry's model, the following hypotheses were formulated for testing in this study.

Hypothesis (H1) - Students who adopt an integration strategy exhibit higher perceived academic success.
Hypothesis (H2) - Students who adopt a marginalisation strategy have the lower of perceived academic success.
Hypothesis (H3) - Students who adopt an assimilation exhibit higher perceived academic success.
Hypothesis (H4) - Students who adopt a separation strategy exhibit lower perceived academic success.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study is designed based on a quantitative, cross-sectional research approach, which is appropriate for assessing the relations amongst variables through collecting and analysing numerical data for objective measurement of the relationships between acculturation strategies and academic success through a structured survey (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2020).

The rationale for choosing a quantitative design is based on generalising findings across a larger population (Creswell, 2014). In this study, quantitative data helped to shed light on whether the defined acculturation strategies by Berry's model have a quantifiable effect on participants' perceived academic success.

The research design involved an online survey that enabled the collection of data from a large number of respondents. The structured questionnaire enabled maintaining consistency and comparability of responses across the sample, thereby allowing an objective evaluation (Saunders et al., 2020) of acculturation orientations and their possible associations with perceived academic success. The data collected through the survey was statistically analysed to test the hypotheses and determine the strength and nature of the relationships between acculturation strategies and perceived academic success. This approach ensured that the findings were generalisable and contributed to the broader understanding (Neuman, 2014) of how cultural adaptation impacts educational outcomes.

The multiple choice questions with Likert scale responses in the survey were constructed so that one out of the four acculturation strategies in Berry's model were reflected - participants would have to choose which strategy best describes their experience. In the section related to academic success, Likert scale responses were again collected to gain some measure of perceived success in terms of academic performance and the overcoming of learning difficulties.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique (Neuman, 2014), which is a non-probability sampling technique, was used in the study as participants were selected based on pre-defined criteria relevant to the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2020). Purposive sampling ensures a more focused analysis of how acculturation experiences influence their perceived academic success.

Sample Size

The survey obtained a total of 208 responses, with post-hoc G*power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) demonstrating achievement of a power of 86.4%.

Pre-test Survey

A pre-test of the original 40-item questionnaire was piloted to 12 students who gave feedback on the clarity of the survey items. Multiple-choice questions (MCQs) were crafted with items on a Likert scale to assess students' adoption of acculturation strategies and to measure perceived academic success. Based on the feedback from the students, changes were made to the survey items to make them clearer and more concise.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey was distributed through WhatsApp groups of Sri Lankan student communities in New Zealand. The WhatsApp groups were easily accessible making this an efficient method of reaching out to the target population, and through these initial participants, the reach of the survey progressed wider amongst those who had enrolled in tertiary education in New Zealand. Participants were invited to complete the survey using a Google survey platform.

Reliability

Cronbach's alpha (1951) was calculated to check the internal reliability of the research instrument. This is a statistical measure of the degree of affinity among a set of items; a rule of thumb is that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or more is acceptable (Taber, 2018). The check returned a very high Cronbach's alpha value of 0.836, which showed that the items were highly interrelated and converged to reflect the underlying theoretical constructs under study, acculturation and perceived academic success. Accordingly, the instrument was confirmed to be internally consistent and reliable.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Analysis

Gender Distribution
The sample comprised 112 females (53.8%), 95 males (45.7%), and one participant who preferred not to state their gender (0.05%).

Age Distribution
Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 40, with the largest groups in the 36–40 and 41+ categories.

Field of Study
Most participants were enrolled in Business Management (40.4%) or Information Technology (34.6%), with smaller numbers across other disciplines.

Level of Study
More than half of the sample (53.8%) were enrolled at NZQA Level 9, with smaller proportions across Levels 6–10.

Table 1

Duration of Stay in New Zealand

Time period	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Less than 1 year	69	33.20%	33.20%
1-2 years	125	60.10%	93.30%
3-4 years	10	4.80%	98.10%
5 years and above	4	1.90%	100.00%

Analysis of responses to survey questions regarding acculturation strategies and perceived academic success

Table 2 below shows participant responses to the remainder of the survey questions regarding their study habits and academic cultural orientation. These were grouped under a number of different headings.

Table 2

Study Habits and Academic Cultural Orientation

Item	N	% of Total	Cum. %
Thinking and processing information while studying			
I switch between English and my native language (Sinhala/Tamil) to better understand concepts.	120	57.70%	57.69%
I think and process all information in English.	56	26.90%	84.62%
I think in my native language to process information.	30	14.40%	99.04%
I find it difficult to understand academic concepts in both languages.	2	1.00%	100.00%
Taking notes on learning			
I write all my notes in English.	150	72.10%	72.12%
I use both English and my native language when taking notes.	49	23.60%	95.67%
I first make notes in my native language, then translate them into English.	8	3.80%	99.52%
I find it challenging to write effectively in both languages.	1	0.50%	100.00%
Receiving peer feedback on my academic work			
I feel comfortable receiving feedback from both Sri Lankans and peers with a New Zealand academic background	149	71.60%	71.63%
I prefer feedback from those with a New Zealand academic background because it aligns better with my academic goals	36	17.30%	88.94%
I prefer feedback from peers with a Sri Lankan educational background, as it helps me understand better.	21	10.10%	99.04%
I find it difficult to apply feedback, regardless of whether it comes from a Sri Lankan or New Zealand academic background	2	1.00%	100.00%
Teaching methods and classroom participation			
I prefer a combination of both New Zealand and Sri Lankan teaching and learning styles.	132	63.50%	63.46%
I prefer the teaching methods that are new to me in New Zealand.	50	24.00%	87.50%

I feel more comfortable when the teaching methods in New Zealand are similar to those in Sri Lanka.	23	11.10%	98.56%
I find it challenging to engage with either New Zealand or Sri Lankan teaching and participation styles.	3	1.40%	100.00%
Use of technology in studies			
I mix technology practices from both Sri Lanka and New Zealand.	123	59.10%	59.13%
I am fully comfortable with the tech tools used in New Zealand, even if they are new to me.	57	27.40%	86.54%
I use technology in ways similar to what I'm used it in Sri Lanka.	23	11.10%	97.60%
I struggle to adapt to the technology used in both Sri Lanka and New Zealand.	5	2.40%	100.00%
Selecting course content to select project topics			
I choose topics that allow me to connect both Sri Lankan and New Zealand contexts.	143	68.80%	68.75%
I choose topics that are relevant to the New Zealand context.	46	22.10%	90.87%
I prefer topics that help me explore aspects of the Sri Lankan perspectives.	6	7.70%	98.56%
I find it challenging to relate to topics from either the Sri Lankan or New Zealand contexts.	3	1.40%	100.00%
Working on group projects or study with others			
I enjoy working with both Sri Lankan and New Zealand peers.	162	77.90%	77.88%
I prefer working in groups that follow the New Zealand educational style.	24	11.50%	89.42%
I prefer working with peers who share a Sri Lankan educational background.	18	8.70%	98.08%
I find it challenging to work well with peers from Sri Lankan or New Zealand backgrounds.	4	1.90%	100.00%
Facing academic challenges			
I combine educational strategies from both Sri Lankan and New Zealand academic cultures.	165	79.30%	79.33%
I use strategies taught in New Zealand.	24	11.50%	90.87%
I stick to the educational strategies I learned in Sri Lanka.	17	8.20%	99.04%
I find it challenging to work well with peers from either Sri Lanka or New Zealand.	2	1.00%	100.00%
Managing my time for studying			
I combine time management techniques from both Sri Lanka and New Zealand.	150	72.10%	72.12%
I use routines and practices I learned back home.	28	13.50%	85.58%
I follow time management tips recommended in New Zealand.	25	12.00%	97.60%
I struggle to manage my time well using either approach.	5	2.40%	100.00%
Seeking support that has an impact on my academic journey			
I find it easy to use both New Zealand and Sri Lankan support systems.	139	66.80%	66.83%
I am comfortable using the new support systems available in New Zealand.	40	19.20%	86.06%
I prefer to seek advice from Sri Lankan peers or communities that reflect my cultural background.	26	12.50%	98.56%

I find it challenging to use the support systems available in either Sri Lanka or New Zealand	3	1.40%	100.00%

Most Frequently Adopted Acculturation Strategy

As seen in Table 3 below, participant responses were then analysed to determine which acculturation strategy – Integration (INT); Assimilation (ASM); Separation (SEP); and Marginalisation (MAR) - was being used most frequently.

Table 3

Most Frequent Strategy

Most Frequent Strategy	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
INT	153	73.6%	73.6%
ASM	42	20.2%	93.8%
SEP	11	5.3%	99.0%
MAR	2	1.0%	100.0%

Of the acculturation strategies adopted by respondents, the most frequently adopted strategy was integration (INT- 73.6%) which suggests that the largest number of students tends towards a strategy of engagement with both cultures.
The second most frequent strategy - assimilation (ASM) was adopted by 20.2% of the students. The frequencies for separation (SEP) and marginalisation (MAR) are far lower at 5.3% and 1.0% of the sample, respectively.

Academic Success by Most Frequently Adopted Acculturation Strategy

Table 4 below shows the relationship between the most frequently adopted acculturation strategies and student perceptions of their academic success.

Table 4

Breakdown of Academic Success by Most Frequently Adopted Acculturation Strategy

Most Frequent Strategy	N	Mean	95% Confidence Interval		Median	SD
			Lower	*Upper*		
INT	153	4.22	4.120	4.31	4.20	0.597
ASM	42	3.72	3.458	3.99	3.90	0.853
SEP	11	2.93	2.155	3.70	2.60	1.150
MAR	2					

Integration (INT) strategy has been adopted with a mean academic success score of 4.22 (higher than the overall mean score), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.120 to 4.31. The relatively low standard deviation of 0.597 suggests consistent academic success with students who adopt INT. This result supports H1. Accordingly, the results indicate that the students who embed their heritage culture with engagement in the New Zealand academic culture report a higher level of perceived academic success.

Assimilation (ASM) strategy has been adopted with a mean academic success score of 3.72, with a confidence interval of 3.458 to 3.99. This provides partial support for H3 suggesting that assimilation might contribute positively to perceived academic success, but with less certainty than integration as the standard deviation is relatively high (0.853). The result suggests that while some students adapt well to the New Zealand academic culture, others may face challenges due to the lesser emphasis on maintaining their Sri Lankan academic culture.

Separation (SEP) strategy has been chosen by 11 participants only with a mean academic success score of 2.93, which is significantly below the overall mean of 4.03. This finding supports H4, which proposed that separation would be associated with lower perceived academic success. The lower mean suggests that students who maintain their Sri Lankan academic cultural identity without engaging with the New Zealand culture may struggle more with academic adaptation, likely due to a lack of integration into the educational and social systems of New Zealand.

Marginalisation (MAR) is the least common strategy with only 2 participants (too small a sample size) selecting it - the low academic scores of both participants likely indicates that the lack of engagement with both the heritage and host cultures likely aggravates difficulties in academic adjustments due to lack of support structures necessary for success in a new cultural environment.

Parametric Tests

Linear Regression Analyses

Separate simple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the impact of each acculturation strategy (INT, ASM, SEP) on perceived academic success. Marginalisation (MAR) was not analysed using regression due to the very small number of participants who selected this strategy.

Impact of integration strategy on perceived academic success

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of the integration (INT) strategy on perceived academic success. The model showed a moderate positive correlation ($R = 0.446$), with $R^2 = 0.199$ indicating that approximately 19.9% of the variance in perceived academic success can be explained by INT. Although not a large proportion, this represents a meaningful contribution. The adjusted R^2 (0.195) was only slightly lower, and the F-statistic ($F = 51.1$, $df1 = 1$, $df2 = 206$, $p < .001$) confirmed that the model was statistically significant.

Students who reported using an integration strategy also showed the highest levels of perceived academic success, with a mean score of 4.22. The narrow confidence interval (4.120–4.31) and low standard deviation (0.597) indicate consistent self-reported perceptions of academic progress among those who engage with both Sri Lankan and New Zealand academic cultures.
Accordingly, H1 is accepted, as students who adopt an integration strategy report higher perceived academic success. H01 is rejected because the p-value is statistically significant.

Impact of assimilation strategy on perceived academic success

A linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the effect of the assimilation (ASM) strategy on perceived academic success. The model indicated a weaker relationship than that observed for integration, with R and R^2 values reflecting a smaller proportion of explained variance. The regression coefficient for ASM was positive, indicating that higher levels of assimilation were associated with increases in perceived academic success, although the effect was less pronounced and less consistent than for INT.

Students who adopted an assimilation strategy reported a mean perceived academic success score of 3.72. The wider confidence interval (3.458–3.99) and higher standard deviation (0.853) suggest greater variability in how these students evaluated their academic progress. This pattern indicates that while some students may benefit from fully engaging with the New Zealand academic culture, others may experience challenges due to reduced reliance on familiar Sri Lankan academic practices.
Accordingly, H3 receives partial support, as assimilation shows a positive but less stable association with perceived academic success.

Impact of separation strategy on perceived academic success

A linear regression analysis for the separation (SEP) strategy indicated a negative association between SEP and perceived academic success, with the regression coefficient showing that higher levels of separation were linked to lower perceived academic progress. This aligns with the expectation that limited engagement with the host academic culture may hinder students' adjustment.

Students who adopted a separation strategy reported a mean perceived academic success score of 2.93, which is substantially below the overall sample mean. The wide confidence interval (2.155–3.70) and high standard deviation (1.150) indicate considerable variability, suggesting that students who maintain strong reliance on their heritage academic culture may face greater challenges in adapting to the New Zealand educational environment.
Accordingly, H4 is supported, as separation is associated with lower perceived academic success.

Impact of marginalisation strategy on perceived academic success

Marginalisation (MAR) was selected by only two participants, and therefore no regression analysis was conducted for this group. Both participants recorded low perceived academic success scores, consistent with the expectation that limited engagement with both the heritage and host cultures may restrict access to academic and social support systems. However, the extremely small sample size means these observations should be interpreted cautiously.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight clear differences in perceived academic outcomes among Sri Lankan international students based on their acculturation strategies. Consistent with Berry's model, integration emerged as both the most widely adopted and the most academically advantageous strategy. Students who adopted integration as an acculturation strategy experienced the highest levels of perceived academic success. This orientation aligns with existing literature suggesting that bicultural students draw on a wider range of cognitive, linguistic, and social resources, supporting smoother academic adjustment and stronger engagement (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Yu et al., 2020).

A further insight from the findings is the importance of bicultural academic competence, which appears to underpin the perceived academic success of students who used an integration strategy. Beyond simply engaging with two cultures, these students demonstrate an ability to switch cognitively and behaviourally between Sri Lankan and New Zealand academic expectations. This flexible learning style reflects cultural frame switching, which shows that individuals who can draw selectively from two knowledge systems tend to exhibit greater adaptability and academic resilience (Hong et al., 2000**)**. For Sri Lankan students, the ability to use familiar study techniques—such as rote structuring or bilingual information processing—while also adopting New Zealand's participatory pedagogies creates a productive synergy that boosts academic outcomes. This suggests that integration is not only a social orientation but also a powerful cognitive resource that enhances academic performance.

Another notable implication is the role of institutional climate in shaping acculturation choices (Ward & Rana-Deube, 1999). The dominance of integration among respondents suggests that New Zealand tertiary environments may already be structured in ways that encourage intercultural engagement— for example, through collaborative learning, interactive classrooms, and supportive teaching practices. However, the perceptions of lower academic outcomes among students favouring separation or marginalisation show that these environments may not adequately support students who arrive with greater cultural distance, weaker academic English, or fewer social networks. This underscores the need for institutions to recognise diversity within international cohorts and build supports tailored to varied acculturation pathways rather than viewing "international students" as a single, homogeneous group.

In contrast to integration, marginalisation was strongly associated with poorer perceived academic outcomes. Students who disengaged from both their heritage and host cultures showed diminished belonging, weaker support networks, and reduced motivation—all factors known to impede academic persistence (Makarova & Birman, 2015; García et al., 2019). Although the group was small, their pronounced academic disadvantage mirrors broader research showing that marginalisation is the least frequently adopted strategy, often linked to isolation, identity disruption, and emotional strain.

Assimilation presented a more complex pattern. While some assimilating students appeared to benefit from embracing New Zealand's academic norms, the overall trend suggested a negative association with perceived academic success. This aligns with studies showing that assimilation can heighten psychological stress due to identity conflict or loss of culturally familiar coping mechanisms. For students educated in Sri Lanka's more structured, teacher-directed system, fully adopting New Zealand's independent, discussion-driven learning environment without retaining anchoring practices from home may create difficulties in participation, confidence, and academic self-efficacy. The findings also reveal that psychological factors play a significant role in shaping students' acculturation choices. Strategies such as assimilation and separation may emerge not purely from cultural preference but as coping responses to stress, language anxiety, or uncertainty about belonging.

Assimilating students may be highly motivated yet feel disconnected from heritage support networks, while separating students may avoid engagement due to fear of negative evaluation or perceived linguistic inadequacy. These emotional burdens can limit students' capacity for academic interaction, peer collaboration, and help-seeking, ultimately reducing academic success. This reinforces the argument that acculturation strategies are not simply behavioural patterns but also psychological indicators of students' sense of safety, confidence, and connectedness in the host academic system.

Separation likewise showed a negative relationship with perceived academic success. Students who maintained strong Sri Lankan academic norms while avoiding engagement with New Zealand's pedagogical practices struggled with classroom participation, group work, and academic communication. Language apprehension, cultural distance, and unfamiliarity with interactive learning environments likely contribute to these challenges. This echoes findings that limited host-culture engagement reduces opportunities for feedback, support, and academic integration (Rudmin, 2009). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that acculturation is a multidimensional process shaped not only by cultural orientation but also by students' psychological readiness, institutional support, and the compatibility between prior educational experiences and host academic expectations. Students who successfully integrate appear better positioned to navigate the complexities of higher education in New Zealand, while those adopting separation, assimilation, or marginalisation may face deeper structural and emotional barriers to academic success. The strong outcomes associated with integration emphasise the value of educational environments that validate cultural heritage while promoting active participation in the host academic culture.

Conclusion

This study examined the acculturation strategies that best predict the perceived academic outcomes of tertiary Sri Lankan students in a New Zealand context. Our results indicated that integration is the most frequently adopted strategy as this allows students to participate in the host culture while maintaining their cultural origins. Such dual engagement appears to generate better perceived academic outcomes in students, facilitated by access to their extended social networks. On the other hand, marginalisation resulted in a lower level of perceived academic success, and such students may end up with a lack of access to support systems and poor academic outcomes. These results underline the critical role of cultural maintenance and active engagement with the host culture in developing academic success. While assimilation and separation strategies showed tendencies to exert positive and negative influences, respectively integration was found to be the best strategy for better academic results for international students.

Recommendations

The above-described findings emphasise that balancing cultural maintenance alongside engagement of students into the host culture helps to enhance the perceived academic experiences of Sri Lankan students in New Zealand. Insights gained from the findings enable the framing of the following recommendations, which will help educational institutions, policymakers, and other stakeholders to establish a positive enabling environment of learning for international students. As acculturation strategies shape students' preferences and participation, institutions can support international students through targeted programs that seek to address language proficiency, academic preparation, and cultural adjustment. Further, the availability of culturally relevant inclusion opportunities allows students' backgrounds and experiences to be taken into account to better enable them to connect with their own cultural identity. This is important in facilitating sociocultural adaptation and should make students more engaged and interested in learning. It introduces a sense of belonging and reduces alienation when students see their culture and experiences reflected in the curriculum (Gay, 2010; Samuels, 2018) which is a common challenge during the process of acculturation. For example, Garcia et al. (2019) noted that students who participate in campus events felt more connected to their new environment, which created a sense of belonging and improved their academic engagement supporting smoother transitions and better academic achievement.

In order to promote integration and academic success, academic institutions can consider providing targeted support programs such as language and academic support, intercultural engagement activities, and social integration activities (Bianchi & Martini, 2023). These efforts can possibly improve international student's all-round experiences and help further develop an inclusive educational environment. Programs or activities should be held by institutions in which international and domestic students participate in cultural events, share academic projects and engage in intercultural dialogues (Spooner-Lane et al., 2013). Such initiatives have been found not only to make students feel more integrated, but also to avail themselves of both the comforts of cultural familiarity and exposure to new cultural norms (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018).

Establishing mentorship programs where international students are paired with either local students, peer students or alumni who have already been successful in the host cultural and academic setting (Kim & Egan, 2011), can support Sri Lankan students to become well integrated into the New Zealand cultural environment. A mentoring relationship can serve to create social integration and provide an understanding about how to manage academic expectations, thus improving feelings about connectedness and academic adjustment (Krsmanovic, 2020).

Social support from institutions, friends, and social networks that include host nationals can positively impact cross-cultural adjustment (Shu et al., 2020). However, it is important to have tailored support for marginalised students to adopt more result-oriented acculturation strategies through methods such as counselling and peer support groups. The creation of peer support networks can be helpful for marginalised students, where students may find others from similar cultural backgrounds, and may relax feelings of alienation.

Assimilation was not a strong predictor of academic success in this study. Assimilation could be beneficial if combined with an understanding of diverse cultural perspectives. Lewis (2021) explains the need for recognising and incorporating the original cultural background of assimilated students into class discussions and study curriculum in New Zealand. Assimilated students often adopt to the dominant culture without critically engaging with it, and academic institutions can create spaces for intercultural dialogues (Lewis, 2021), where students can discuss the challenges of assimilation and share their experiences with both domestic and international peers. Collaborative academic projects involving diverse student groups can encourage students practising separation to engage with the host culture for better academic success. By working with peers from various cultural backgrounds, these students can gradually increase their comfort levels with cultural engagement beyond their own group. Participation in culturally mixed group projects can positively impact student's attitudes towards diverse groups and enhance their intercultural competence (Summers & Volet, 2008)

Community group partnerships and collaboration with locally based cultural organisations can yield an extended network of support for international students beyond the institute (Soong & Maheepala, 2023). Such partnerships increase the student's sense of belonging and provide additional support to institute-driven initiatives on academic success. Initiatives aimed at social integration, in collaboration with local communities, staff and peer students themselves, have also experienced positive outcomes in supporting international students (Owens & Loomes, 2010).

Institutions must also review and revise policies regarding cultural inclusivity in academic and social interactions. Effective frameworks need to consider inclusivity through classroom practices, academic support, and institutional events in a way that will enable international students to balance their culture with engagement in New Zealand academic ethos.

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