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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INTEGRATION AT UNIVERSITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MONTESSORI PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism is one of the most characteristic features of contemporary education, and Latvia can be mentioned among the countries implementing multicultural education. International students are an everyday phenomenon at Riga Technical University (RTU) as well. Therefore, integration of international students in the study environment of RTU, providing an opportunity to acquire the basics of the Latvian language and helping them to get acquainted with the culture and traditions of Latvia, is of utmost importance. The research mainly focuses on RTU's multicultural education system, analysing its advantages and drawbacks. The research also reflects students' views on basic principles of the renowned Italian pedagogue Maria Montessori, who focused her pedagogy on the diversity in education, including the young adult age. The main aim of this research was to identify students' perspectives on their studies at the multicultural environment of RTU, as well as to clarify students' opinions on the basic principles of Montessori pedagogy and their possible implementation at the university to promote the integration of international students. 137 RTU students from 20 different countries participated in this research. Content analysis was chosen as a research method to reveal students' ideas, collect and select their opinions on the topic. The results of the research suggest that implementing multicultural education at the university has positive aspects, though it also presents challenges. The principles of Montessori pedagogy could potentially be applied in multicultural education; however, it is recommended to conduct more detailed research to clarify their practical use in higher education.

Keywords: *culture, integration, Montessori pedagogy, multicultural education, multiculturalism*

Introduction

Multicultural education nowadays is of high importance. The mobility of international students has increased substantially over the past few decades (Kim and Zhang, 2022, as cited in Gutema et al., 2024, p. 844). According to UNESCO, international student mobility rose from 2 to 6.36 million from 2000 to 2020 (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 844).

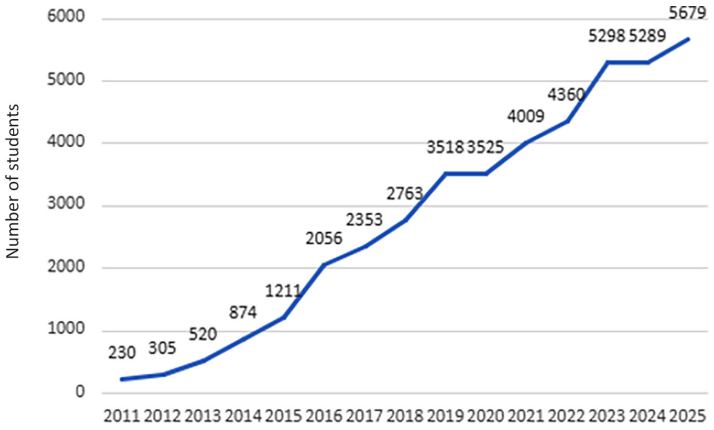


Figure 1. International student dynamics: Number of international students at RTU, 2011–2025

Source: Data provided by RTU International Cooperation Department, October 1, 2025.

'International students' are defined as 'those who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study' (OECD 2020, p. 235 in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144), which can refer to students from all continents and include both speakers of English as a first language and as another language (Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144). Özoğlu (2015) suggests that factors such as the quality of education, academic reputation of the institution, availability of scholarships, tuition fee, ease of mobility through lower visa requirements and the possibility of better job opportunities in the host country are significant factors that motivate international students to study abroad and stay after graduation (Özoğlu et al., 2015, as cited in Gutema et al., 2024, p. 856). Therefore, universities should prioritise creating an environment that promotes social integration, fosters multiculturalism and provides career and job opportunities (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 857). Riga Technical University is part of this process. The implementation of international academic mobility supports and ensures the attractiveness of higher education institutions in the international environment (Juškevičienė et al., 2022, p. 316). Engineering programmes are the second most internationalised area of higher education, after business studies (OECD 2020, as cited in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144). According to the data from the RTU International Cooperation Department, the number of international students increased from 230 in 2011 to 5,679 in 2025.

It is the reason why the integration of international students into the RTU study environment is crucial. This research mainly explores the experiences and opinions of RTU students on the multicultural education system there identifying its strengths and limitations. The research also introduces reflections by RTU students on the basic principles of the famous Italian educator Maria Montessori – such as fostering independence and self-esteem, prioritising practical application over theory, ensuring an inclusive environment, and promoting positive communication and collaboration. The study evaluates the possible implementation of these principles at the university level to promote

international students' integration there. Apart from these issues, the research provides insight into the education system of other countries, as the surveyed students come from different regions of the world.

Thus, the main aim of this research was to identify students' views on their studies at the multicultural environment of RTU as well as to clarify students' opinion on the basic principles of Montessori pedagogy and their possible implementation at the university level to promote international students' integration.

The research questions are the following ones.

1. What are the advantages and challenges of the RTU multicultural education system?
2. Can the basic principles of Montessori pedagogy be used to promote international student integration at the university level?

Characteristics of the international student integration process

Integration is a many – sided process and has its own specific features in education. The global landscape of higher education has witnessed a steady increase in the mobility of international students, as more individuals seek diverse academic experiences and cross-cultural learning opportunities (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 843). However, at the same time, integration remains a crucial challenge for countries and institutions hosting students (Kéri et al., 2026, p. 139). While social relationships with local students help improve international students' language skills and social adaptation, many international students tend to socialise more with fellow international students than with local peers (Kéri et al., 2026, p. 156). Socialisation with other international students is much easier and preferable to socialisation with local students (Cheng & Adeloka, 2022; Li, 2017; Wang et al., 2012, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, pp. 148–149). This limited interaction with local students may constrain international students' cultural and social integration in the host country (Kéri et al., 2026, p. 156). Therefore, in such an increasingly international higher education environment, preparing students to cooperate with each other is crucial, both for their academic careers and their professional ones (Bergman et al., 2022, p. 153). Many studies adopt a "culture-as-given" perspective (Handford et al., 2019, as cited in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144), in which a person's national culture is seen as a key indicator of their behaviour and the differences between national cultures are emphasised (e.g. Arzberger et al., 2010; Downey et al., 2006; Jesiek, Shen, and Haller, 2012, as cited in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144). This approach has been widely criticised for being overly simplified. The "culture-as-construct approach", on the other hand, interprets national culture as one variable amongst others in a person's identity (Handford et al., 2019; Holliday, 2010; Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021, as cited in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144). Other variables might include a person's academic background, discipline, or international experience (Bergman et al., 2022, p. 144). This "culture-as-construct" approach can aid group dynamics. Amadasi and Holliday argue that establishing threads or connections between the members of the group are needed to overcome the differences

and create feelings of "insideness". These threads are described as "diverse aspects of our pasts that mingle with the experiences that we find and the threads of the people that we meet" (Amadasi and Holliday, 2017, as cited in Bergman et al., 2022, p. 146). According to Berry's (2005) acculturation model, the students who adopt an integration strategy to maintain their cultural identity while interacting with the host culture tend to have more positive experiences (Berry, 2005, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 155). The students' ability to practice religious beliefs is also of a high importance (Kéri et al., 2026, pp. 156–157). Thus, students keep their own cultural identity and are getting richer by other cultures. As J. Dempsey believes, "This type of collaborative energy affects everyone, increasing the knowledge and skills of all participants" (Dempsey, 2017, p. 192).

Apart from socialization problems, there are also other barriers which hinder the integration of international students and lead to a potential loss of valuable talents for the host country (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 857). They are language and cultural differences, lack of information, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, differences in living standards, migrant status, visa problems and lack of funding (Juškevičienė et al., 2022, p. 316). According to Gutema, the decision to study abroad is a complex and interconnected process, and policy changes, language barriers and the pull of family ties in their home country may influence international students' decision to stay in the host country or return home (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 857).

Montessori pedagogy represents a viable framework to favour the integration of international students. It will be explored in the following paragraph.

Montessori pedagogy to promote the integration of international students

Maria Montessori based her pedagogy on four child development phases known as Montessori planes of development from a child's birth through adulthood. The common and to a certain extent justified opinion is that M. Montessori devoted most of her interest and time to developing her theory to help learners at their early stages, the first plane (from birth to age 6) and the second plane (age 6–12), however, there are also useful and interesting Montessori's findings and ideas concerning the third plane (age 12–18) and the fourth plane (age 18–24), the one which was topical for the authors of the article in the process of research. These findings are fully applicable to the tertiary level students who are in the focus of this research. According to Montessori, the fourth plane of development – the maturity plane – is characterised by spiritual, emotional, and moral independence. Young mature people of this age devote a lot of time to thinking about the questions related to education and culture, the potentialities of prospective human life as well as their own possibilities and responsibilities (Montessori, 1971, pp. 11–12). The higher education institution the young people study at can considerably help them by providing the environment and conditions for a multifaceted personality development and quality education.

According to the research of A. K. Murray et al., Montessori education offers a unique perspective for addressing many shortcomings identified in current approaches to undergraduate instruction (Murray et al., 2022), one of them being the traditional lecture delivering

model as the prevailing method of delivering information at a higher education institution. Consequently, one of the recognized tasks of contemporary education is transition to a more student-centred approach and their active involvement in acquiring knowledge and drawing conclusions rather than getting them ready-made and formulated by lecturers. Montessori pedagogy is designed to foster deep engagement through freedom and discipline (Rathunde, 2009, 2014, as cited in Murray et al., 2022), meaning a relatively high level of students' own choice. Montessori principles could be of great help in implementing a student-centred approach as they foster deep learning, engagement, intrinsic motivation, and adaptability among adolescents. The responsibility for studying is on students, however "the Montessori approach offers scaffolding and appropriate demands" (Murray et al., 2022, p. 4).

This research focuses more on four aspects of M. Montessori's pedagogy. The first of these is students' independence. M. Montessori wrote in her book "Montessori method" stating that it was a child (student) who needed to "perfect himself through his own efforts" (Montessori, 1912, p. 209). According to that view, the primary task of an educator is formulated as aiding life while leaving it free to unfold itself (Dempsey, 2017, p. 79).

Another key aspect of Montessori pedagogy is its focus on practical application over theoretical instruction, "It is very important to see each child as a mirror of the whole, carrying a unique and important purpose. Each human comes into this world with something to contribute to it. Therefore, it is crucial to assist students in finding the tools to navigate this complex task" (Dempsey, 2017, p. 248). Practical work, a joy of discovery and job-ready skills can help students realize their potential.

One more aspect is an inclusive environment. Montessori believed that "the things the man sees are not just remembered; they form a part of his soul" (Montessori, 2007, p. 56), and "education is a natural process carried out by the child and is not acquired by listening to words but by experiences in the environment" (Montessori, 2007, p. 7).

The fourth aspect focuses on the communication and collaboration process. Montessori pedagogy emphasizes the potential of a group, "The students feel a sense of pride in the classroom community. It is not only about the child, but also about the group. Everyone's contributions toward group goals support the development of character strengths (endurance, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance) and are all, again by default, intrinsic to the teaching techniques and the social interactions/ dynamics embedded in the environment" (Dempsey, 2017, p. 263).

Methodology

The research was done in Latvia at the end of the 1st semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. It is important to stress the limitations of this research. The core findings of this research were initially presented at the 4th International Scientific Conference "Meaning in Translation: Illusion of Precision", held at Riga Technical University on May 24–26, 2022. As the conference proceedings remained unpublished, the authors subsequently sought alternative publication venues, submitting the research to the Rezekne Academy of Technologies (RTA) in March 2024.

However, the submission was initially flagged for plagiarism. Subsequent investigation revealed that the study had been uploaded to the Course Hero platform without the authors' permission or knowledge by a former RTU international student. The mechanism by which the student obtained unauthorized access to the research remains undetermined. Despite facing prolonged administrative difficulties in resolving this intellectual property infringement, the authors successfully coordinated with the RTU Information Technology Department to have the unauthorized material removed from the website. Subsequently, the research was re-submitted for publication to the University of Latvia.

It is also necessary to mention that the research was conducted at the circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic when the studies were organized remotely. This limited the data collection process. Furthermore, the data were collected at only one university – Riga Technical University (RTU) – thus limiting the scale of the research. Nevertheless, despite these challenging conditions, 137 students from Riga Technical University (RTU) participated in the study. They were students from different countries: Latvia (31), India (33), Sri Lanka (20), France (13), Uzbekistan (9), Russia (6), Azerbaijan (5), Egypt (3), Turkey (3), Ukraine (2), Iran (2), Nepal (2), Belarus (1), Lithuania (1), the United Kingdom (1), Italy (1), Greece (1), Kazakhstan (1), China (1), and Cameroon (1). They were students of different academic years, study programmes – master's degree programme students and bachelor's study programme students –, and faculties: the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning; the Faculty of Civil Engineering; the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology; the Faculty of Electrical and Environmental Engineering; the Faculty of E-Learning Technologies and Humanities; the Faculty of Engineering Economics and Management; the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications; the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Transport and Aeronautics (the data according to the 2020/2021 academic year). The faculty structure has recently been consolidated.

The students participated in the research by writing an essay *Riga Technical University (RTU) as a Multicultural University. My Experience*. The essay was organized at the end of the 1st semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. The aim of the essay was to identify students' experience of their studies at the multicultural environment of RTU. Students were encouraged to share their views on the teaching and studying process at RTU. They were also asked to compare their studies in Riga with the teaching and studying process in their home countries. Apart from that, students were introduced to the philosophy and pedagogy of M. Montessori and its basic principles. Students were invited to consider whether these principles could be implemented at the university level to facilitate the integration of international students. Prior to writing the essays, students were informed that their essays would be used as research data. Furthermore, they were assured that participation was entirely voluntary. The essays were written in English. However, it is important to stress that the essays were a task assigned by the lecturer, which may have impacted the students' willingness to be open and honest when characterizing their studies. Students could have avoided criticism, and the data might have lost their validity.

Content analysis was chosen as a research method to analyse students' ideas and opinions. The content analysis was done in the following way:

1) coding was done by one of the authors of this research;
2) coding was validated by the other author of this research;
3) the narrative text was divided into fragments (content units) containing individual statements by the respondents that describe and/or interpret their experience,
4) the meaning of the content units was determined,
5) codes to each content unit were developed;
6) codes were inductive;
7) content units expressing similar ideas were grouped into analytical categories;
8) the categories were combined to form broader concepts based on the content of these categories (Geske & Grīnfelds, 2006, pp. 113–121).

Research Results

Students' independence and self-esteem

The first aspect of Montessori pedagogy researched was student independence and self-esteem. There were 37 students participating in this research who emphasized the importance of independence both in their studies and lives. Students also showed differences in their studies at school and at university.

Table 1. Independence and responsibility

Content units	Analytical categories
"At school we were always dependent on our friends and teachers. University life teaches us to be independent. This life makes us stronger and makes us use our own efforts to succeed in life. We can make our own decisions influencing everything" (a student from India).	Difference between studies at school and at university
"The biggest difference between a high school and a university is that you are treated as an adult. That means you must take greater control of how you spend your time and what you study. It also means that your education is your responsibility; no one is going to do it for you" (a summarised view given by a student from Latvia and a student from Russia).	
"There are many things that we study on our own, such as our mistakes, findings, and comparisons" (a summarised view given by a student from Latvia; a student from Uzbekistan; a student from Egypt).	Autonomy and responsibility
"In Latvia almost all my courses require my own research and exploration. The teacher will not tell me everything. A large part of my study makes me look up the information on my own" (a student from China).	Deeper insight into studies
"There is also a lot of homework, more than in France. This is good because it allows us to work in complete autonomy. On the other hand, it is true that it is sometimes difficult to start working on your own" (a student from France).	

However, some students also had a critical view on studying on their own.

Table 2. Criticism on studying independently

Content units	Analytical categories
"I make a big negative point when a subject is managed by several teachers who obviously do not communicate with each other. Having graded homework to return, without having done the lesson before, is very complicated. Moreover, when the lessons reach us, these are scans of indigestible and incomprehensible books. We must, therefore, learn the subject alone" (a student from France). *"I was not prepared for such intensive studies and minimal attention from the staff"* (a student from Latvia).	Negative aspects of studying independently

This suggests that when students prove they can take responsibility for their actions, their self-esteem – a crucial component of social standing – increases significantly. Therefore, multicultural education could not only fulfil students' studying aims but also raise their independence, self-esteem and status in the society leading to students' inclusion into the labour market. This aspect has been analysed in the next part.

Prioritizing practice over theory develops students' creativity and discovers their unique talents

Studying in a multicultural classroom offers many benefits. The main one is the diversity of thinking and variety of views due to a different cultural background, upbringing, education, and life experiences of students. Consequently, the diversity turns into a value to be kept, developed and shared and a multicultural classroom turns into a place where students start to think unconventionally. Furthermore, practical, hands-on studying promotes thinking out of the box, paving the way for new discoveries. It could be the reason why many students (51) emphasized the importance of doing things practically.

Table 3. Studying related to the real-world problems

Content units	Analytical categories
"Studying is totally based on practical work, which I think is easier for students to understand" (a summarized view given by a student from Nepal; a student from Sri Lanka; five students from India; a student from Uzbekistan; a student from Egypt). *"Most of the assignments are related to the real-world problems, which make a significant impact on our career pathways"* (a summarised view given by a student from Sri Lanka and a student from Latvia). *"University encourages students to conduct fresh research not focusing on what has been already discovered"* (a student from India).	Practical research Professional career development

Therefore, it is possible to draw a conclusion that practical work develops students' creativity, helps to reveal their unique talents, and supports their inclusion in the labour market.

The environment and atmosphere at university could also be the tools to promote students' professional career development. Therefore, the next part will characterize the main aspects of an inclusive environment.

An inclusive environment

The environment and atmosphere at the university are also of great importance promoting student inclusion. Firstly, the environment and atmosphere at the university influence students' sense of belonging to the university. Some students have described university as "a new level in their lives" (a summarized view given by a student from Latvia and a student from Russia).

Table 4. The environment of the university

Content units	Analytical categories
"When I first stepped into the university, the atmosphere, the people, the size, the style, everything felt completely different to me, not to mention how it feels now after studying at RTU for a semester. (...) The first thing that I noticed and felt is the importance of where I have got and how I got there. It felt surreal that after 12 years at school I entered the "next level", I could not get over it. I had no time to research if studying architecture is hard, whether it is time consuming, how it has been done and so on. I practically went into it blindly but so far, I have managed to keep myself somewhat sane after the days and nights of hard work" (a student from Latvia).	Perspective environment
"I chose to study at a large university because I like being part of a big and diverse student group. The world is big, and I believe that becoming part of a large university will also prepare me better for living and succeeding in this world" (a student from India).	
"Most of the students here are very smart, determined and usually successful. So, it is interesting to be around that sort of people" (a student from Latvia).	
"The study experience can be successful if the learner likes what they are studying and has the right people around them. That, even without realizing it, creates a desire to become something more" (a summarized view given by two students from Latvia).	

It is possible to draw a conclusion that students highly evaluate their belonging to the university community, and it may help them not only better include there but also promote their professional growth.

The research also revealed other qualities characterizing an inclusive environment. One of them is democracy at the university. Democracy must be an integral part of the teaching and studying process. This implies that students' rights to express their opinions should remain free from external pressure. When evaluating this quality, the students expressed favourable views regarding Latvia.

Table 5. Democracy at the university

Content units	Analytical categories
"The professors can see student involvement and interest, because no one is forced to study, everyone does it because of their own desire" (a summarized view given by two students from Latvia).	Freedom and initiative to study
"We – students – have a possibility to express our point freely. The professors support us, and we work together" (a student from Egypt). *"You can always ask a lot of questions and not be afraid of judgement"* (a student from Latvia).	The right to express an opinion

Another key feature of democracy is equality. The research data prove that the students express various views on the issue of equality at RTU. There are both positive and negative opinions.

Table 6. Opinions on equality at the university

Content units	Analytical categories
"The professors act equally to all students here in Latvia" (a student from India).	Equality
"There are some professors at the university whose attitude towards their students differs. Their behaviour could be characterized as racial" (a student from Egypt).	Inequality

It means that the level of equality and tolerance at the university level as well as in the whole society, unfortunately, is not a commonly and generally accepted concept.

Democracy and equality must be closely linked to institutional support and encouragement. However, the student feedback indicates that the university still needs to improve in this area.

Table 7. Support and encouragement at the university

Content units	Analytical categories
"Despite the fact that Latvian people are generally not very 'smiley' towards strangers, at RTU, professors and staff of this establishment were gentle, helpful, and cool" (a student from France).	Support
"I think that there is a lack of support in Latvia" (a student from France). *"I have felt many times left in an uncertain situation where nobody is able to follow or advise me on what is supposed to be done, in other words, there have been occasions where I was unable to join meetings or unclear was the way I was supposed to, and even though I have written/called support and lecturers, I have not received any solution"* (a summarized view given by a student from Italy; a student from Iran; a student from Egypt).	A lack of support

The third aspect characterizing an inclusive environment is discipline which is closely related to self-control and responsibility. Student perspectives regarding discipline and freedom vary significantly, ranging from critical viewpoints to more liberal opinions.

Table 8. The views on discipline and freedom

Content units	Analytical categories
"In Latvia teachers are less concerned about knowing who is or is not coming to classes. Even if some teachers do not ask who is at the class, there are lists to see who is coming. We are asked to study by ourselves" (a summarized view given by two students from France).	Attendance and punctuality
"Schoolteachers always control your homework and get very angry if you do not do it well, at university nobody cares about your problems, you must control yourself and do all work on time" (a student from Latvia).	Freedom and responsibility
"University lecturers take you much more seriously, as well as give you more creative freedom at work. In my opinion, it is much easier to communicate with university lecturers, because they generally do not behave as if they were superior to students, they simply take care of providing students with the necessary information (...) I really liked professional relations with teachers because that made me feel like a grown-up and also improved my responsibility" (a student from Latvia).	

This leads to the conclusion that how people perceive discipline and freedom may have originated in their experiences, such as upbringing and education. This may explain why some people hold more conservative views while others tend to be more liberal. However, it is hard to deny that discipline within freedom fosters personal maturity and responsibility. These qualities are among the main factors influencing the intercultural communication process at the university, which will be analysed in the following part.

A positive communication and collaboration process

This research mainly focuses on the relations between the teaching staff and students, and students – students. Many students (38) have agreed on the importance of positive communication and collaboration at the university. When characterizing the relations with their lecturers in Latvia, most students had a favourable opinion.

Table 9. Positive lecturers – students communication process

Content units	Analytical categories
"In France, we have to ask professors to be helped, here, professors come to us to help us" (a student from France).	*Importance of a positive communication and collaboration process*
"*The communication process between the teaching staff and students is crucial. Most professors at the university can create a friendly atmosphere. Students feel free and comfortable here"* (a student from Uzbekistan).	
"There is a diversity of students from different countries with different cultures. So, it is amazing how teachers deal with students and how they manage each student's capacity and utilize it accordingly. In India instructors do not involve students so much" (a student from India).	
"Professors are more focused on students' questions; in France, if a student has a question, the professor will answer, and the course will continue. Here in Riga, it was different, when a student had a question, the professor answered him/her and then this professor took more time to explain his answer in a different way by giving examples, etc.... It is better than in France in this aspect" (a student from France).	

However, there were also opinions of several students who pointed out some difficulties in the process of communication in comparison with their native country. Delayed responses could be explained by the specific circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic and the scale of the university. However, the main reason could be hidden in the way of communication at the university, which is professional but formal. Therefore, the relations between the students and the teaching staff involve more distance.

Table 10. Problems in the lecturers – students communication

Content units	Analytical categories
"In France, teachers are very responsive and often present on Teams or other messaging platforms within a minute, whether during the week or at weekends. In Latvia, some teachers respond after a week, and it is sometimes difficult to understand an exercise quickly, which is problematic for us since we do not get a response from them" (a summarized view given by two students from France). *"At my university in France we are not more than 100 persons per promotion, so our teachers really know us. In Latvia we are at RTU which is a big university and there are a lot of students, so teachers do not really have time to take care of each student and know their level or even just know their names"* (a student from France).	*Delayed responses*
"What I feel is a lack of communication between professors and students, back in India I used to have meetings with professors if we had an issue relating the subject or personal problems, we were able to solve it with the help of professors, removing the awkwardness between the professors' and students' communication" (a summarized view given by two students from India; two students from Sri Lanka; a student from Turkey).	Insufficient communication

Effective peer communication is crucial to the student experience. Many students (27) have emphasized the importance of positive communication among students, with the majority (16) evaluating these relationships positively. However, the remaining participants have expressed a variety of differing views.

Table 11. Positive peer (students – students) communication

Content units	Analytical categories
"Here I came to meet a lot of local and foreign students from different countries, learn their living style and experience their culture as well as learning style. There is no doubt that I took a lot of advantages from them, learnt a lot of things which I could not get in Nepal" (a student from Nepal).	Positive effects of communication
"In Latvia, I think every teacher of mine will care about group work. Because I seldom had the task of cooperating with my classmates during my studies in China in the past, I think it is a great experience and it is very challenging for me, in the process of group work, not only can I meet new friends, but also feel different cultures. (...) The Chinese teachers require more personal tasks than group cooperation, and they think that individuals should take more responsibility" (a student from China).	
"I have never met so many nice people in one room" (a student from Latvia).	

However, there were also opinions revealing communication problems.

Table 12. Insufficient peer communication

Content units	Analytical categories
"I would like to use my knowledge and skills practically when working. But I do not feel supported. The attitude towards me could be characterized as sceptical. I miss communication with my peers. Despite this, it is a new experience and a way of learning. We must be patient" (a student from India). *"In Sri Lanka senior students help their younger colleagues who face difficulties in studying. They explain the learning material for the groups of 2–3 students and it makes them follow the material much easier. We do not have such practice at RTU. There is no interaction between local and foreign students as well as there is no interaction between the senior students and their younger peers"* (a summarized view given by two students from Sri Lanka).	Attitude to foreign students Student – student interaction

Thus, the data demonstrate that the communicants – students and the teaching staff – cultivate or hinder an inclusive environment, thereby either promoting or impeding student integration in the university community.

Discussion

The research focuses on four pillars of Montessori pedagogy, which can be adapted and used to help international students to integrate more successfully into their studies and the broader university community. These core pillars include some basic principles of Montessori pedagogy: fostering independence and self-esteem, prioritising practical work over theoretical instruction, ensuring an inclusive environment, and encouraging communication and collaboration.

According to the research results, quite a notable number of students (37) emphasized the importance of independence both in their studies and personal lives. Higher education requires more independence compared with secondary school, which means studying more autonomously and gaining a deeper insight into studies. Independence leads to responsibility and time and work management. While it could be a challenge, at the same time it positively impacts the students' personal development. Furthermore, as suggested by Juknytė-Petrekienė and Pukelis, this is particularly evident during international academic mobility, which is most often associated with students' academic and professional progress as well as personal changes in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes (Juknytė-Petrekienė and Pukelis, 2007, as cited in Juškevičienė et al., 2022, p. 310).

There were many students (51) who emphasized the importance of practical application over studying much theory. Practical engagement stimulates creativity and hones talents. Universities bear the responsibility for revealing and developing their students' potential and gifts. It is especially important for international students who seek new experiences, knowledge and directions. According to Gutema et al., universities play

a crucial role in attracting and retaining international students through language programmes, education quality, global rankings and job-ready skills. Therefore, it is important for universities to better understand the needs and motivations of international students and develop strategies to attract and retain them. Furthermore, employers need to be more open to hiring international graduates, recognizing their competencies and contributing to their retention (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 857).

Research results prove that an inclusive environment and atmosphere at university is very important and make students feel welcomed there. The university is a place where students can meet people with similar interests – lecturers and other students. Students start and develop their professional career there. Students highly value democracy, the right to express their opinion, equality as well as support and encouragement at the university. A university should be a community students want to belong to. It is especially important for international students. As stated by Huyen, integration of international students is understood to mean a sense of belonging and feeling comfortable and content both in class and on campus (Huyen, 2015, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 139). Taylor & Ali (2017) explained that the students break their home country friendship, and they need a micro social support system in the host country (Taylor & Ali, 2017, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 148). Apart from that, language barriers are the most significant challenge, because insufficient proficiency in the local language can lead to social isolation and stress. Personal motivation as well previous experiences abroad are of high importance. Cultural differences and the process of adapting to the host country's social norms can also be challenging, causing students to feel excluded or isolated. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles, insufficient support from universities, program structure and availability of scholarships hinder the integration process (Kéri et al., 2026, pp. 156–157). Universities should work towards creating a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages foreign students to stay and contribute to the host country's economy and society (Gutema et al., 2024, p. 857).

Many students (38) have agreed on the importance of positive communication and collaboration at university. Quite a lot of students (27) have also emphasized the importance of positive communication among students. Most of them (16) evaluated students' relations positively. However, students have pointed out that international students tend to make more contacts with other international students or with peers from their own country. Thus, their interaction with local students is limited. Pederson (2010) states that socialisation among international and local students is an urgent need and brings benefits; therefore, institutions should also develop mechanisms to make this socialisation possible (Pederson, 2010, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 148).

Surowiecki also emphasizes the importance of communication and collaboration, "We use the wisdom of crowds in the economy by saying that, under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent and are often smarter than the smartest people in them" (Surowiecki, as cited in Dempsey, 2017, p. 192). He stresses, "A large group of diverse individuals will come up with better and more robust forecasts and make more intelligent decisions than even the most skilled decision maker" (Ibid.). The following

measures are recommended: facilitating intercultural events or mixed-nationality teams (e.g., Pedersen, 2010; Sierra-Huedo et al., 2017, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 155) or expanding peer-mentoring programmes that connect international and local students (Ragavan, 2014, as cited in Kéri et al., 2026, p. 155).

Conclusions

1. University life teaches students to be independent. However, this independence brings challenges, particularly regarding personal responsibility as well as work and time management. If students can cope with these challenges, their self-esteem may increase, leading to a higher social status and more successful integration into the labour market.
2. A multicultural environment may inspire innovative thinking and assess the value of diversity. Furthermore, practical application fosters creativity and reveals students' unique talents, ultimately leading to their growth and more challenging professional opportunities.
3. The university environment and atmosphere significantly impact students' sense of belonging there as well and can shape their further professional perspectives. An inclusive academic environment is fostered through democratic principles, the freedom to express opinions without pressure, equality, support, encouragement, alongside personal responsibility and self-discipline.
4. Communication and collaboration between the teaching staff and the students could be enhanced by fostering more active, less formal dialogue and reducing distance between the lecturers and students. Additionally, intercultural communication of students, especially local ones, should be less sceptical and include more interaction.
5. The students' views on the basic principles of Montessori pedagogy – students' independence and self-esteem; prioritizing practice over theory; an inclusive environment and a positive communication and collaboration process – are meaningful and valuable, however, their possible effect on students' integration process has not been clarified yet and requires more detailed investigation.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Dr. Sc. admin. Antra Roskoša and Mg. philol. Diana Rūpniece are the members of RTU teaching staff. The interests of their research focus on teacher professionalism, education management, multicultural class management, intercultural communication, as well as the aspects of technical translation.

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