Integration Experiences of International Students: A Case Study of Sub-Saharan Students in a Moroccan School of Design and Engineering

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Abstract

An increasing number of international Students opt for studying at a university in a foreign country. It is believed that this mobility makes these students face academic and social integrating challenges in their new learning environment. In Morocco, thousands of students, who are scholarship-granted by the Moroccan government, coming from different countries, chiefly from Sub-Saharan Africa seek education in different universities of the kingdom. The main aim of this study extends its focus to explore two outcomes. Particularly, it investigates the social and academic integration experiences of a case study of international students undertaking an undergraduate programme at a Moroccan school of design and engineering along with the challenges these students encounter. Moreover, the study situates these experiences within the institutional conscious efforts that are implemented to achieve an integrational goal. Data were collected from a case study in spring 2019 by interviewing 20 Sub-Saharan students studying at the Moroccan Design and Technology engineering school in Meknes (ENSAM: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Métiers) and 3 of the school staff members. Using thematic analysis and then interpretative phenomenology as a guiding framework to analyse and present the data, the findings revealed that the study's participants have experienced both their social and academic integrative patterns at the school in the same way. Indeed, three major themes were identified and analysed, namely, Programmes promoted by ENSAM on integration, relationship patterns between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan students and barriers to integration. The study revealed that the various integration efforts carried out by the school do not sufficiently cater for Sub-Saharan students' perspectives on their social and academic integration experiences. Additionally, staff knowledge regarding the integration of these minority groups is not adequately enhanced through pre-service training that covers best practices for successful integration. Language barrier and interaction patterns between Sub-Saharan students with their host ones are also found to influence Sub-Saharan students' social and academic integration. It is suggested that Moroccan Higher education institutions (HEIs) should acknowledge integration as a long and challenging process for Sub-Saharan students, and that an evaluation of integrative practices promoted at the school is needed.

1. INTRODUCTION

International students may choose to study abroad for various reasons, including access to high-quality education, exposure to different cultures and languages, career opportunities, and personal development. Students are mobile across national borders to pursue higher education in countries other than their own. This mobility has become increasingly common in recent years due to globalisation, advancements in transportation and

communication technology, and the internationalisation of higher education. Morocco, being a sending country of students throughout centuries, has witnessed a phenomenal rise in inward mobility over the past few years. A number of these inward students originates from Sub-Saharan Africa. The number of Sub-Saharan students is increasing with each school year since the early 1970s after the attributes to keep the country's strong relations in the region by granting scholarships to students from diverse African national backgrounds (Berriane, 2013). These attempts are merely political in nature, since the country's concern is to reunite with its African neighbours through the cooperation agreement (Barre, 1996). It is believed that the academic and social integration of international students is crucial for their overall success and well-being during their studies abroad.

Tinto (2015) emphasizes the importance of academic integration, which involves students' engagement with academic work, faculty, and institutional resources and how social integration plays a key role in students' overall satisfaction and adjustment to college life. The increasing mobility of Sub-Saharan students into Moroccan universities urges Moroccan government to focus on the part played by education system in the integration process of these students. Given that education is the gateway to guarantee a nation a better future, studies on the integration of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan higher education, are very few which causes the void in literature and provokes the growing concern over the extent to which Moroccan HEIs respond to the academic and social integration of this community.

This paper aims to explore the social and academic integration experiences of Sub-Saharan students at the Moroccan Design and Technology Engineering School in Meknes (ENSAM: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Métiers). It examines the challenges these students face and evaluates these experiences in the context of the institution's deliberate efforts to achieve integration. The following research questions guided the presented study: (1) How do Sub-Saharan students perceive their social and academic integration at ENSAM? (2) What are the challenges Sub-Saharan students encounter in the process of their social and academic integration at ENSAM? and (3) What are the institutional efforts made to socially and academically integrate Sub-Saharan students at the school?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Studying Abroad Challenges
Though international students are considered as 'temporary' and international students constitute a 'less problematic' group of foreign arrivals (Li, 2017), they still face challenges at different levels and bring out to the forefront different sorts of concerns by pursuing higher education outside of their home countries. Indeed, the adaptation of international students to their host universities depends on many factors, such as the adjustment to their new environment, academic pressure, finances, language barriers, and loneliness (Almurideef, 2016). The degree to which one adapts to their new environment depends on the long of stay, differences between host and home cultures, the environment one lives in and activities one does with and inside their new community. Students' capacity to adjust to their academic surroundings affects their decision to intentions to persist or dropout (Lakhal et al., 2020).

Moreover, challenges international students are faced with can also be consequences of lack of social support, language difficulties and sociocultural demands (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz et al., 2008; O'Reilly et al., 2010). Each of these hinders can affect students' integration at the academic and social level. Tremendous challenges can be experienced in the process to integrate into an unfamiliar learning community with a different language and culture, not to mention pedagogical perceptions. Integration processes for international students are closely

linked to the host country's efforts to incorporate these communities. This includes involving faculty in factors that contribute to student success and ensuring the satisfaction of international students throughout their integration experience (Smith, 2020, p. 272). Consequently, it is crucial to address how to develop and implement integrative policies within universities in host countries.

2.2.International Students' Integration

Discussing integration is complex, as it encompasses individuals' personal life experiences and can be perceived differently. In the literature, integration in defined as "assimilation to a pre-existing, unified social order, with a homogeneous culture and set of values" (Sengupta, 2015, P. 22). Integration of international students can be seen from different perspectives. It puts special emphasis on the concept of unity and stability resulting in social cohesion (Rudiger & Spencer, 2003, p.6). Thus, the integration of international students into their new school must be seen as a two-way process, and the inclusion of these communities "should not only require the participation of international students themselves but involve all faculty members, staff and host university students" (Guo & Chase, 2011, p.316). At the school level, efforts to address integration may involve various aspects, including course offerings, extracurricular activities as a type of informal education, and adjustments or changes to the curriculum itself (Leask, 2015). There are mainly two types of international students' integration in higher education, which hinder successful adjustment into host countries (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). Social and academic integration are intertwined (Townsend & Wilson, 2009), and both point to a process of adaptation.

Academic Integration

Academic integration deals with the level of students' academic adaptability including their "learning environments, social adaptation, adaptability of mind and body, degree of learning pressure, and recognition of one's school" (Song, 2013, p. 14). Students' adaptability to their new academic environment opens the discussion about the school attempts to help these students' integration, especially if "those who feel at home, participate actively in extra-curricular activities, and feel connected with fellow students and teachers are more likely to persevere in their studies" (Li, 2017. p.82). Academic integration is also defined by students' level of intellectual development, and perception of having a positive experience in academic settings (Tinto, 1993; 2015). Different aspects on how the school cherishes diversity can influence the degree to which newcomers feel a sense of belonging. Beil and Shope (1990) also point out that another factor of students' successful academic integration can be the positive experiences that these communities have with academic advisors. The dynamics between school staff and teachers with students affect the learning process, including the integration of international students into the new school setting.

Social Integration

Social integration is another form of international students' integration in higher education. Social integration, as the term suggests, is related to students' degree of adaptability into school life, which includes their participation within the school social network (Rienties, et al., 2011). It caters for the implementation of "group-based cooperation such as making friends, participating in social activities, and small group projects" (Song, 2013, p. 15). In the field of education, group-work based activities or projects aim at providing students with opportunities to collaborate and cooperate with each other. Studies on the social integration of international students have highlighted the positive effect of establishing social networks with host nationals (Bochner et al., 1977; Coles & Swami, 2012). In the same respect, group-work based projects

and unity-building activities, such as workshops and clubs encourage greater interaction between peers, who constitute their own learning through sharing skills, experiences and through working together to find solutions to common problems (Lakhal et al., 2020).

2.3. International Students in Morocco: Sub-Saharan Students

Morocco is making huge and remarkable efforts to foster cooperation with international bodies since it has developed bilateral agreements and international co-operation with different countries across the globe to facilitate and encourage students' exchanges. Due to globalisation and Morocco's connectivity through media at both the regional and global level, the mobility of international students towards Morocco has been increasing. The restrictive student visa requirements and high cost of higher education in Europe makes Morocco an attractive alternative for international students. Most of these students seeking Moroccan higher education are mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa and other African countries. The phenomenon of sub-Saharan students' flaw to Morocco flourished after independence when Moroccan policies have sought interests in maintaining strong connections with West African states through economy, culture and politics (Berriane et al, 2015). Berriane et al. (2015) also argued that Moroccan state has granted scholarships to Sub-Saharan students, as part of cooperation agreements between Morocco and African countries since 1970s. These grants are another pull factor behind the increasing number of students who have decided to enrol in the kingdom's universities that hosted more than 8500 students in 2013-14 (Berriane et al., 2015). This number increased in 2019-2020, with more than 12,000 students from Sub-Saharan countries coming to Morocco for their university studies (Hatim, 2019). Sub-Saharan students, who enjoy visa-free travel to Morocco (Senegal, Mali for instance), come to the country in order to pursue their studies and seek economic integration (Berriane et al., 2015). The phenomenon of hungry Sub-Saharan students for affordable but quality higher education in the kingdom (Samasumo, 2019) is considered as a symptom of globalisation and perfect propaganda for the favour of the country's higher education system (Koundouno, 2019). Nnumerous number of these students have been considering Moroccan universities as a promoter of their academic excellence since the Moroccan government has encouraged these flows by providing scholarships under different agreements and diplomacies with its African neighbours (Berriane et al., 2015). At the same time, it is crucial to address the integration experiences and barriers—both academic and social—that this student community faces as they seek to achieve their educational goals abroad.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The study places a deep focus on Sub-Saharan students' stories to identify their underlying experiences of social and academic integration as well as reasons behind the challenges that these students face in their integration processes. It seeks to explore these experiences and situate them within the institutional integration attempts. This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, since it helps to acquire data from real-life experience of the participants.

3.1. Research Sample and Instruments

The case study was conducted in a single school (ENSAM) with 20 Sub-Saharan students out of 83 international students coming from Sub-Saharan African Countries and three members from the school educative and administrative staff. The current study utilizes three technics of data collection: ethnography using a naturalistic perspective, semi structured sit-down and walking interviews. Most of the interview questions (except those eliciting demographic information) were open-ended questions enabling participants to talk freely and express feedback beyond the given questions, which provided topics that were unexpected at the beginning of the study.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection procedure took two months during spring 2019 beginning from May the 15th by the author. A pilot study, which helped in making adjustment related to language and avoiding some confusion, was conducted by interviewing three Sub-Saharan students at the school. Most of the interviews were individually conducted face to face, and one was held through focus groups in a naturalistic sitting – the school library. Interviews were conducted mainly in French, transcribed and translated to English for analysis.

Multiple methods were used to recruit interviewees. First, I asked the schools' office of international students' enrolment to send invitations to all Sub-Saharan students registered at ENSAM to participate in the research. Those who volunteered were contacted by telephone or instant message in order to schedule the date and time of the interviews at a convenient time for both the respondents and me (May 2019). Second, snowball sampling was used by encouraging research participants to invite their friends who were willing to participate in the study. Among students' interviewees, 8 were female and 12 were male students. All students' participants were in their twenties with an average of 20 years and 24. These included students who had just come to study in Morocco for their first year, and those who had come to Morocco for more than three years. Regarding my ENSAM staff participants, an interview was first conducted with the head of the International Students' Office before approaching two teachers from the school. These teachers, highlighted by all my participants for their direct involvement in the integration experiences within the school, offer language courses and are the only ones with more hands-on integration practices while teaching their classes.

The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to half an hour due to my participants' allotted time. All interviews were recorded and transcribed on the same day of data collection. The interview data were analysed using interpretative content analysis; particularly interesting insights were written down during the interview, but most of the analyses were carried out based on the interview transcripts. In the following section, I will present the results obtained from the methodology employed in this study. My participants shared their feelings, perceptions, and experiences regarding their integration, and they were open to providing direct quotes and their names after their responses were cited. Thus, everything is disclosed in this article.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key points were noted during the analysis and then categorised to develop major and sub themes related to research and interview questions. Substantially, all my participants have experienced both their social and academic integrational experiences in the same way and in relation to the school's efforts to integrate.

4.1. Programmes Promoted by ENSAM on Integration

All my participants identified the experiences of extra-curricular practices organised within the school. These take the form of a Cultural Day (la journée culturelle), clubs and different social networks inside the school. In this study, Tinto's (1993) student integration theory emphasizes the importance of social integration in higher education, highlighting that interactions with faculty and administrators, participation in extra-curricular activities, and involvement in informal group associations are key mechanisms for fostering social integration. These elements contribute to the student's sense of belonging and engagement within the academic community, which can positively influence their retention and success.

La Journée Culturelle "Day of Cross-Cultural Sharing"

All participants interviewed acknowledged the existence of the organisation of a "cross-cultural sharing day", (Journée culturelle) each year at the end of April, in which they

exchange and display different Sub-Saharan cultural aspects. The following examples were illustrated:

"ENSAM School organises a cultural day every year, in which we get to exchange our cuisine (Laughing).... Each country presents a typical meal that reflects its cooking traditions". Said Abubaker and Isaka from Nigeria and Waliou from Burkina Faso.

"ENSAM is a school that fosters social integration through giving Sub-Saharan students an opportunity to share their cultures and home-traditions": Said ENSAM administration responsible.

As it was mentioned by my participants, ENSAM uses a cultural exchange day as a form of cultural diversity celebration, which aims at encouraging and fostering intercultural communication for a cohesive society. Scholars emphasise the responsibility of higher education to raise their students' awareness of one's own cultural values and of that of other cultures in order to help them to place themselves in the multicultural world (Zorina et al., 2016). However, apart from different cultural aspects' exhibition, most of my participants do not see any integrative side of this school attempt since integration is defined to be a process rather than an end in its own.

Malik from Benin and Sahazanay from Madagascar are the organizing members of a community that voices out Sub-Saharan students' problems. Malik is the president of the foreigner students' community at ENSAM (Communauté des étudiants étrangers a l'ENSAM) while Sahazanay is the secretary of the community. Both emphasized that this day would have been more effective if scheduled at the beginning of the year. It is even regarded as an extracurricular activity for which teachers who assist in organizing the event will assess participating students. My participants claimed:

"This day is definitely not enough for an integration. It presents some aspects of one's culture, but I do not see it of an integrative goal. In addition, the scheduled timing of this day should have been placed at the beginning of the year for a better start, especially for new comers": Said Malik ans

Sahazanay

"…. the day of cultural exchanges? It is an extra-curricular activity of a collaborative aim, which my students are graded on. "Said Abdellah, the professor of communication and group dynamics.

How this day is used to highlight the school's commitment to cross-cultural education, yet is merely treated as another pedagogical task to be graded, highlights a deficiency in a robust cross-cultural education foundation. The latter is defined as the study in which both common and different features of given cultures are recognised and accepted as they are without claiming to modify them (Portera, 2014). Several participants noted that this day is scheduled at the end of the school year, whereas it should be planned earlier. They also pointed out that it does not significantly contribute to integration or address the integrative needs of Sub-Saharan students.

Ward and Kennedy (1993) also suggest that perceived cultural distance between the home country and the host country is a significant source of problems encountered in socio-cultural adjustment. They note that a larger perceived cultural distance often results in greater difficulties in adjustment, as students struggle more to adapt to the new cultural norms and practices of the host country. Moreover, they argue that the greatest difficulty for such students

occurs at the very beginning of their stay, when they are least familiar with the host culture and have limited interaction with local people (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). This initial period can be particularly challenging as students navigate new environments and attempt to build social connections, which are crucial for their adaptation and overall success.

As reported, some participants happen to consider this day of cultural exchanges as a pure display of their own cultural practices of their origins. They criticised the use of this school's strategy regarding Sub-Saharan students' integration. This reflects Campbell and Li (2008), who emphasise cultural differences and a lack of intercultural communication as the primary hinders behind international students' successful integration. Parekh (2006) advocates for intercultural dialogue, recommending that we strive to comprehend the perspectives of others and allow them the opportunity to explain their views. He also stresses the importance of a shared culture for a secure and cohesive multicultural society, asserting that intercultural interactions should be facilitated in an equitable environment.

Additionally, the host community's engagement with inward students is critical for successful social integration. Three major elements, which contribute to social integration of international students, include academic faculty, counsellors, and local students (Arthur, 2017). Several studies have documented that students often experience isolation when they first arrive in a new country due to their lack of established social networks (Bochner et al., 1977; Sawir et al., 2008; Brown, 2009). According to Hurtado et al. (2007), students' membership in various societies and clubs can either contribute to cohesion or lead to marginalization on campus.

School Clubs

Twelve clubs were reported as another form of extra-curricular activities inside ENSAM. These have the purpose of reducing distances for a sense of belonging result. Indeed, the social life that gathers international students with their host domestic ones is of a great significance to social integration and adaptation of these minorities. Clubs are meant to bring students with similar interests together for the reason of breaking down any hurdles through giving them a common ground to start with and also, as (Ward, 2001) suggests, they give an opportunity to share the same enthusiasm with other students which can influence newcomers' social integration. Aside from one exception, who reported his satisfaction with his participation in a sport club, the rest of Sub-Saharan participants hardly engage in the schools' clubs for one main reason of language barrier. The latter has proven to be a challenge hindering the success of ENSAM's endeavours to integrate.

"*... I am in the sport club, and I like it so much since I get to play football and practice my   football skills.":* Acknowledged Abubaker from Nigeria.

 I would relate my finding about this exception to Berriane's (2013) assertion that football is a shared enthusiasm between Moroccans and Sub-Saharan students (p.33).

The School's Social Support Systems

Another institutional effort noted by my participants is the implementation of student support groups within ENSAM. Two support groups were mentioned: one represents all students of ENSAM and the other speaks for only Sub-Saharan students. According to my participants, this support network aims to offer personal and emotional assistance to Sub-Saharan students by helping them address and overcome their integration-related challenges.

"*There is an organisation which aims at representing ENSAM Students, but we thought that we need another voice to give to Sub-Saharan students inside the school":Said* Malik and Sahazanay

Sub-Saharan students appear to seek a different type of support, as they do not engage with the first network. The second network, emphasized by most of my interviewees, is designed to represent this minority group within the school. Connecting students with student supporting services sharing the same label of ˝integration-seeker˝ may raise their sense of belonging amongst each other. It is regarded that the existence of support systems inside schools improves psychological and social integration (Cho & Yu, 2014; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Yusoff, 2012). Several studies have also documented that students try to alleviate their loneliness by creating a co-national network of peers (Bochner et al., 1977; Sawir et al., 2008; Brown, 2009).

However, these types of networks remain vulnerable and less powerful since they are mainly composed of relationships among individuals from the same community. The teacher of communication also acknowledged the importance of this network for Sub-Saharan students adding that it remains non-sufficient for a strong representation of this minority:

"The community of Sub-Saharan students is small in number. It is a good attempt to form this network to represent their needs inside the school. Yet, it is still not enough and poor to represent this minority."

ENSAM improvised strategies to integrate sub-Saharan students might be related to lack of pre-service training dealing with best practices for a successful integration. Pre-service training should include various integration strategies and focus on implementing cross-cultural communication in classrooms with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. What my respondents from ENSAM staff reported about absence of official governmental circular or training concerning the integration of Sub-Saharan students was shocking to some extent. First, the huge propaganda made about the doubled generous grants offered to welcome this community raises questions about the government readiness to cherish this flow into Moroccan universities. Second, Morocco's advocacy for promoting knowledge sharing at the continental level raises questions about why social and academic integration are not prioritized in the country's educational policies. High hopes are built for knowledge sharing through providing technical education and training, yet, integrative concerns are not embedded along with these African accords.

4.2.Relationship Patterns between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan Students

As an involved researcher, I observed the scarcity of interaction between Sub-Saharan students and Moroccan ones. They were rarely found studying together in the library or hanging out at the school campus. Sub-Saharan students were most of the time grouped together, as the same for their Moroccan counterparts. My Sub-Saharan student participants report experiencing diverse interaction patterns with their host peers. They rarely refer to these peers as friends, as their interactions are mostly confined to the school environment. Participants were asked about the nature of their relationship with Moroccan students. Most see them as colleagues, for example:

"I have a good relationship with some classmates. I can't say we are friends, but we find a common ground to work together": Said Tobin from Burkina Faso.

Khalid, the professor of English also added to this issue his own remark claiming:

"If you notice even outside classrooms or the school, it is rarely that you find Sub-Saharan students with Moroccans all together. You can only find either one Moroccan amongst a group of Sub-Saharans or one Sub-Saharan student among a group of Moroccans."

When entering a new and often challenging environment, students tend to seek comfort in the familiar. For Sub-Saharan students, sitting together in class fosters a sense of belonging and helps mitigate feelings of isolation. The spatial organization inside the classroom reflects how sub-Saharan students spontaneously create their own clan within the class (Berriane, 2013).

Lack of interaction outside the school borders is also seen in the fact that all my participants have only Sub-Saharan roommates. Malik, Habiba, Walyou, Isaka, Sahazanay, Abubaker, Ahmadou and others claim:

"*We co-rent with other Sub-Saharan students.*"

Surprisingly, in her study on the integration mechanisms of sub-Saharan migrants in Moroccan urban spaces, Berriane (2013) notes that the daily life of sub-Saharan migrants in Fes primarily unfolds in apartments shared with other sub-Saharan migrants and students. She explains:

> Having an official and legal status in Morocco and representing a highly educated group does not, so it seems, have an impact on the way the encounter with the Moroccan population is lived and shaped (Berriane, 2013, p. 9).

Relationship patterns between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan students are changeable but do not generally represent strong friendship. This situation can largely be attributed to the lack of shared activities within the school that focus on highlighting cultural similarities before addressing differences, which could help reduce the distance and tension between Sub-Saharan students and their Moroccan peers.

Andrade (2006) discusses the adjustment factors affecting international students in English-speaking universities. He highlights various aspects that contribute to international students' integration or segregation. He emphasizes that international students often face challenges in adjusting to their new academic and social environments, which can lead to feelings of isolation and segregation. Different studies have also shown that academic barriers, including language differences (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Glass et al., 2012), as well as psychological hinders (Yi et al., 2003; Schartner et al., 2016), including individual factors such as personality traits; significantly impact the experiences of international students.

4.3. Barriers to Integration

All my participants were studying abroad for the first time in their lives. The challenges they encounter during their social and academic integration processes can be divided into language barrier and individual factors.

Language Barrier

Language as a barrier to integration has been observed in various interactional contexts, particularly within the classroom and in interactions among classmates on social media platforms. Apart from one, all my respondents brought up the problem of language as their number one barrier towards integration. The one exception acknowledged absence of language barrier for the similarities between Moroccan Arabic: "*Darija*" (one of the vernacular languages in Morocco) and Mauritanian language.

Some teachers according to the total of my participants use *Darija* as a means of instruction. It does not matter whether it is used with minimum frequency since it hinders Sub-Saharan students' understanding as the teacher of communication and group dynamics claimed:

> *" I was told more than once that some professors make use of Moroccan Arabic : Darija to explain."*

Sahazanay and Malik claimed that all Sub-Saharan students reported the language problem to their support group office. They explained:

> *" The major problem Sub-Saharan students are faced with in their integration process is the use of Darija inside the class."*

A rapid language shift to another language may create a block of understanding, which leads to communication loss followed by sense of exclusion and discrimination and finally hindering Sub-Saharan students' academic integration. Language barriers significantly affect various aspects of international students' lives, affecting their academic performance, social interactions, and overall adjustment in several ways. Smith and Khawaja (2011) emphasise that language proficiency is critical in the acculturation process, influencing international students' academic success, social interactions, and overall well-being. Another consequence of this hurdle is the perceptions of discrimination and increased stress, which hinder these students' ability to integrate into academic and social fabric of the receiving institution (Lee & Rice, 2007).

This highlights the crucial role that teachers' practices play in fostering a cohesive community and promoting better coexistence amid student diversity. Taking into account the challenges posed by international classrooms, teachers are urged to develop different strategies in order to facilitate students' adaptation and integration. As the interviewed teachers claimed, these challenges may be due to the absence of both training and knowledge about better teaching practices in international classrooms.

How to teach in cross-cultural context embodies equipping faculty members with appropriateness and effective use of language (Gopal, 2011, p. 377). In a school of professional training, where the use of French is seen compulsory, the use of *Darija* should be unacceptable. To support my argument, it is said that at the academic level in Morocco; the use of French as a means of instruction is quite normal because Arabic language lacks technological vocabulary (DeGorge, 2002). Additionally, it is known that (most of modules in Moroccan HEIs are taught in French) (Translated by me from: Berriane, 2007). Therefore, language is the main connecting factor between Sub-Saharan students and their Moroccan fellows, and it can inhibit Sub-Saharan students' adaptation and social integration. According to Berriane (2007), one reason after segregation between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan students is the problem of communication caused by differences in French language proficiency level (Translated by me from: Berriane, 009).

Individual Factors

Of particular interest to this study is the experience of social integration among Sub-Saharan students within the school environment. Individual factors were also mentioned in the interviews with my participants as challenges impeding their integration. Personality traits such as shyness, introversion and extroversion are identified to be keys to social integration. First, all my participants highlighted that those who have an introvert and shy personality do not easily integrate. Second, individuals from Sub-Saharan students with an extrovert personality

are likely to engage and adapt. It is believed that extroversion as a personality trait helps the individual to easily adapt to new situations than others (Eun-Ju, Lu, & Jeongwoo, 2011; Lin et al., 2012; Ying, 2002).

As recorded, some respondents reported questioning their Moroccan classmates when they faced difficulties understanding Moroccan Arabic, while others mentioned turning to the Organization of Sub-Saharan Students within the school for assistance. Sahazanay from Madagascar, Meriem from Mauritania and Haron from Burkina Faso explained:

"Shy students and introvert ones tend to find difficulties to socialise with their Moroccan
fellows."

Asking questions at the end of class and try to avoid students-teacher interaction may form another barrier to social and academic integration. The quality of the relationship between students and teachers is vital. Educators who foster strong, supportive connections with their students positively affected their academic experiences and outcomes. Effective interactions between teachers and students contributed to a more engaging and supportive learning environment. Scholars argue that teachers who establish a positive rapport with their students create a conducive learning environment, particularly benefiting international students (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019).

A positive attitude towards their own integration can also increase foreign students' awareness of their role and responsibility in the integration process. An example by a participant was illustrated when she described her interaction with Moroccan students as a must for her own social adaptation. Sahazanay pointed out:

" It is up to me to seek making bounds to facilitate my integration. I feel obliged to adapt
for a better integration."

Studies have shown that extroverted international students experience low level of acculturative stress and reported better psychosocial adjustment compared to introverted students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008). Extroversion facilitated social interactions and support networks, which are crucial for successful adaptation. According to Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000), extroverted individuals are more likely to engage in social activities, leading to better cultural adaptation and psychological well-being.

Individual factors were also mentioned in relation to Moroccan students' personalities. Mainly, curiosity makes some Moroccans from ENSAM Students approach and reach out for their Sub-Saharan peers. The support offered by domestic students facilitate their foreign peers' integration at the personal and sociocultural levels (British Council, 2014). Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) also suggest that domestic students can provide emotional support by forming friendships and social networks that help international students navigate social activities, campus life, and local customs. Local students may already have established social circles, making it hard for international students to penetrate these groups and form meaningful connections. The extent to which international students make friends from the host country serves as a measure of their integration within both the student community and society (Brown, 2009; Campbell, 2012; Hendrickson, 2018). Moreover, since the school fails to build better interactive processes through cross-cultural communication, both students' communities still advocate poor interaction patterns.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that cooperation between the Moroccan government's integrative policies, university staff and teachers, local students, and Sub-Saharan students is essential to meet the integrative needs of international students. The findings also shed lights on promoting better cross-cultural communication through which the school can foster a positive educational atmosphere. Providing both student communities with opportunities to explore and embrace each other's cultural similarities and differences can help bridge the gap between them.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how Sub-Saharan students experience social and academic integration at a specific Moroccan institution. It highlights the specific challenges faced by these students, such as language barriers and a lack of cross-cultural activities, which have not been extensively documented in the context of Moroccan higher education.

By evaluating the effectiveness of institutional practices and support systems, the study challenges the assumption that existing integration measures are sufficient. It shows that while some practices are in place, they often fall short of addressing the real needs of international students, particularly those from Sub-Saharan Africa.

This study was centralized on exploring findings, which trigger suggestions for better functional integrative practices. Bellow, I have chosen to cite the leading findings in my study and advocate a number of recommendations based on these discoveries. Both are aimed at informing Moroccan international institutions, Moroccan integrative education policymakers and practitioners in the field of education by raising their awareness about the challenges Sub-Saharan students are faced with in their process of integration inside the host universities.

First, my results have shown that ENSAM lacks a cross-cultural communication implemented strategy to enhance Sub-Saharan students' social integration and sense of belonging. The school's cultural celebration day remains insufficient for a meaningful representation of the existence of Sub-Saharan minorities inside the school. This challenges the assumption that current cultural events are sufficient and proposes a more proactive approach to fostering intercultural understanding. The school also does not evaluate practices used for extra-curricular activities. The lack of these crucial elements can lead to a sense of exhibited dissimilarity among Sub-Saharan students, resulting in feelings of exclusion. This study does not only recommend incorporating extracurricular activities that initially focus on celebrating commonalities between Sub-Saharan students and their host peers, but also a thorough evaluation of integration practices should be considered to enhance the overall quality of the school, particularly regarding integration measures. Additionally, embodying global perspectives into the curriculum helps students develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and global issues (Leask, 2015).

Second, the results have identified lack of teachers' knowledge about better practices to integrate their Sub-Saharan students inside the classroom. This reflects lack of social and academic integration programmes in the agenda of policy makers for Sub-Saharan students' communities. The study calls for pre-service training for faculty that includes strategies for cross-cultural communication and integration. It urges the Moroccan government to install effective integrative actions into both pre-service and in-service educational programme trainings. Organizing targeted initiatives to address cross-cultural communication and hiring educators from migration backgrounds are other recommendations of this study to HEIs. A representation of these minorities in the curriculum and in other school life can help raise this community's sense of belonging. Research by Wirt and Jaeger (2014) suggests that frequent

meetings between international students and faculty staff contribute positively to learning outcomes.

Finally, the study has found that Sub-Saharan students face disadvantages related to language use. The study underscores the significant role of language in the integration process, particularly the impact of Darija (Moroccan Arabic) on Sub-Saharan students. This challenges the assumption that multilingual environments automatically facilitate integration and highlights the need for a more inclusive language policy. Language barrier is a core element of integration processes for international students. The use of *Darija* inside the classroom, in clubs and amongst students' social groups places Sub-Saharan students at a disadvantage. The study has identified several issues faced by Sub-Saharan students, including comprehension difficulties, communication breakdowns, and a sense of isolation and exclusion. In short, these deficiencies are hinders of social and academic integration. This could be addressed by: (1) raising awareness among Moroccan students and about the negative impact of using Darija in the presence of international students, and (2) enhancing integration awareness for both local and Sub-Saharan students. Engaging professors to focus on language use for integration purposes and encouraging them to use French exclusively as the language of instruction could also help address these issues.

However, Support for student integration extends beyond HEIs alone and involves a range of stakeholders. According to Marangell, Arkoudis, and Baik (2018), this issue transcends university settings to encompass community engagement, emphasizing that effective integration relies on collaboration among various groups beyond academia. This acknowledges that integration of international students is not solely the responsibility of universities but also requires collaboration with local communities, government bodies, businesses, and social organizations. It is about creating a supportive ecosystem that fosters the holistic development and well-being of these students.

5.1. Limitations

In this study, I limited the interviews only for Sub-Saharan students and ENSAM staff. Moroccan students' perspectives were not taken into consideration. This is due to the broad scope of the study, which aimed to explore various aspects of sub-Saharan students' integration. An interesting avenue for future research could involve incorporating local students' perspectives on integration with sub-Saharan students into the survey. This approach could provide a more balanced and complementary understanding of the integration process. In addition, the findings reported in this study belong to a single school that hosts Sub-Saharan students in Meknes. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to all Moroccan HEIs and further research to understand how integration issues may vary across different institutions is needed.

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