

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Psychological adjustment and well-being in hidden student mobility: A study of Moldovan students in Romania

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Abstract

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Background: Student mobility carries mental health and well-being risks, particularly when transition-related needs are hidden by formal student categories.

Objective: This short communication examines Moldovan students with Romanian citizenship in Romanian higher education. Legally classified as domestic, they may undergo an international-like adjustment involving linguistic, cultural, academic, and relational transition.

Methods: We analyzed semi-structured interviews with 24 such students using reflexive thematic analysis and interpreted them through an integrated lens of belonging uncertainty, minority stress, and transactional stress-coping models within a biopsychosocial framework. Four themes were generated: social stressors and belonging difficulties, including accent-based othering and withdrawal; academic and institutional stressors, including educational culture mismatch and help-seeking barriers; mental and physical health costs, including fear of failure, emotional exhaustion, and somatic symptoms; and mixed coping and support strategies.

Results: What distinguishes these accounts from generic student adjustment appears to be their configuration: difference attributed to nationality rather than to socioeconomic or regional background, legal contingency, cross-system educational discontinuity, and the absence of any administrative category through which support might be triggered. Because such students are invisible to provision keyed to international status, screening and belonging-based support should be indexed to adjustment need rather than enrollment category, and directed at institutional conduct as well as individual coping.

Conclusion: Hidden student mobility may constitute a distinct adjustment context in which substantial cross-border transition is obscured by domestic administrative status. Recognizing adjustment needs independently of formal enrolment categories may help institutions identify otherwise overlooked students and design more equitable, context-sensitive support.

Keywords: Psychological adjustment; Student well-being; Mental health; Academic stress; Coping; Hidden mobility

1. Introduction

Student mobility is a health-relevant transition that extends beyond the educational domain: academic demands coincide with separation from familiar support systems, eroded social networks, belonging difficulties, and barriers to help-seeking, a configuration linked to psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and stress-related somatic complaints.¹ Belonging is accordingly treated as a health-psychological construct. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that belonging predicts persistence, engagement, and mental health beyond demographic and institutional covariates,² and a randomized trial across 22 institutions found that a brief social-belonging intervention advanced student progress only where the institution affords genuine opportunities to belong.³ Two things therefore matter for health: how students appraise their standing in the academic environment, and whether the institution allows that appraisal to be a secure one. Together, these help explain how an educational transition is regarded as a health outcome.

Research on transition-related distress has nonetheless been organized around administratively visible categories, with the international student the most prominent. A parallel literature on invisible minorities in higher education indicates that concealability does not attenuate distress, but reconfigures it. Stigmatization generates belonging uncertainty, a state of heightened vigilance in which ambiguous social cues are appraised as diagnostic of one's fit within the institution.⁴ Recent multi-study evidence identifies diminished belonging, reduced social support, and lowered self-esteem as the mechanisms most plausibly linking concealment to poorer health.⁵ These processes correspond to the distal stressors and the proximal processes of rejection expectancy, concealment, and vigilance through which minority stress is internalized, a framework whose extension beyond its original populations has recently been defended.⁶ Accent is particularly consequential, since it renders an otherwise concealable origin audible: accent stigma generates perceived discrimination, fear, and diminished self-efficacy, undermining integration into the host academic culture.⁷

These literatures remain unconnected, and their intersection defines the present gap. Mobility research presumes that transition is administratively visible, while invisible-minority research presumes that the concealed attribute is not itself a mobility attribute. Neither describes students whose legal status is domestic, but whose trajectory involves linguistic, cultural, academic, and relational transition. The omission matters, since only 28% of students with mental health difficulties seek formal help,

with insufficient knowledge of available resources among the principal barriers;⁸ institutional misrecognition can further aggravate both barriers. Such hidden mobility may characterize dual citizens, students from border regions, return migrants, and students moving between countries sharing a language, among whom visible similarity may lead institutions to presume unproblematic integration. Moldovan students holding Romanian citizenship are a paradigmatic instance: legally domestic, they have crossed a border, entered a different education system, and separated from familiar networks, while linguistic and cultural proximity renders their transition institutionally illegible. The integration paradox, the replicated finding that reports of discrimination rise as integration advances,⁹ supplies a plausible prior expectation for this configuration. To our knowledge, this population has not been examined. This short communication therefore characterizes the stressors reported by this group, the health correlates associated with these stressors, and the coping strategies used when transition-related needs go unrecognized.

Three models are integrated. Hidden mobility is conceptualized as generating belonging uncertainty⁴ and concealed-origin stress,^{5,6} in which origin becomes intermittently audible while institutional misrecognition withholds the acknowledgment that would legitimate help-seeking; misrecognition is thereby treated as a distal stressor. These conditions enter the transactional model of stress and coping, in which outcomes depend on the appraisal of demands relative to resources and to the perceived safety of the context,¹⁰ and the resulting strain is read through a revitalized biopsychosocial framework that accommodates emotional distress, somatic symptomatology, and reduced functional capacity without clinical attribution.¹¹ Theoretically, this extends belonging and minority-stress accounts to invisibility that is administrative rather than dispositional. Practically, it implies that screening, well-being provision, and belonging-based intervention should follow adjustment need rather than enrollment category, given that such interventions succeed only where the institutional context is receptive.³ The framework accordingly directs attention to three matters: the channel through which origin remains detectable after legal difference has been removed; the dimension of appraisal on which misrecognition operates, whether by increasing transition demands or reducing perceived available resources; and the range of registers in which strain is reported. These are sensitizing concerns, in the sense that they guided attention during analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) generated themes through the analysts' interpretative engagement with the material, and the framework accordingly shaped what was attended to and how coded material was interpreted; the

coding itself remained open throughout.¹²

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Design, reporting, and ethics

This qualitative exploratory study used semi-structured interviews analyzed through RTA.¹² Reporting followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research; the completed 32-item checklist is provided as Supplementary File 1.¹³

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen over coding-reliability and codebook variants of thematic analysis for three reasons. First, it treats researcher subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than as bias, which mattered because the interviewers shared the participants' regional context. Second, it requires neither a codebook fixed in advance nor inter-rater agreement, both of which presuppose a single correct coding, and no coding frame existed for this population. Third, it accommodates semantic and latent coding within one analysis, necessary because participants described both explicit events, such as remarks about accent, and implicit processes, such as belonging uncertainty.¹² A critical-interpretivist orientation was adopted: meaning was treated as generated through the analysts' interpretative work rather than retrieved from transcripts (Supplementary File 2).

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (approval no. 2951/25.11.2024), and by the Research Ethics Committee of the "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Republic of Moldova (approval no. 1/22.05.2025, following request no. 34/02.04.2025). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.2. Participants and data collection

Purposive sampling was applied to recruit students born and educated in the Republic of Moldova, enrolled in Romanian higher education, holding Romanian citizenship or temporary identity documents, and not classified as international students, through student groups, university networks, and peer referral. Twenty-four students participated (mean age 20.4 years, standard deviation = 1.07; 20 female, four male) across four fields of study: psychology ($n = 8$); social sciences and humanities ($n = 6$); health sciences ($n = 5$); engineering and design ($n = 5$). Thirty-two students expressed interest by email; eight did not proceed when asked to confirm closer to the scheduled interview, citing academic workload or reluctance to be interviewed at length. No participant withdrew after the interview.

Interviews were conducted between May and June 2025 by the first two authors, female assistant lecturers with PhDs in psychology, in their offices with no third parties present. Some participants were enrolled in the same faculty, but none was taught by them, and no relationship preceded the study. Interviews followed a guide of 27 questions across eight domains, used flexibly and not pilot-tested (Supplementary File 2, Table S1); they lasted 11 min 38 s to 24 min 46 s, were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Participants were identified as P1 to P24. No repeat interviews were conducted, and no participant requested transcript review. Reflexive memos served as field notes. The interviewers' shared regional context supported rapport, but required reflexive attention, since it could generate assumptions about linguistic and cultural similarity (full reflexivity statement: Supplementary File 2).

2.3. Data analysis

Transcripts were imported into Taguette (version 1.3.0) and stored on the first author's secured computer. Analysis followed RTA as specified by Braun and Clarke¹² and was treated as recursive rather than sequential.

Three authors read each transcript repeatedly, recording impressions, tensions, and emotional content in reflexive memos, then each coded the complete dataset independently, line by line and inductively, generating both semantic and latent codes. Initial codes clustered around psychological processes (identity dissonance, emotional regulation, distancing), relational dynamics (othering, microaggressions, support), and structural factors (bureaucratic barriers, institutional invisibility). Theoretical constructs informed sensitizing attention but were not applied as a coding frame, and overlapping segments were tagged to preserve multi-coded meaning units.

The three codebooks were then compared. Codes were grouped conceptually, and candidate themes were collapsed, expanded, renamed, or separated through recursive movement between coded extracts and full transcripts until they were internally coherent and homogeneous, and externally distinct.¹² This produced four themes and 12 subthemes; Supplementary File 2, Table S2, gives an audit trail from extract to code, subtheme, and theme.

Because RTA treats divergence between analysts as an interpretative resource rather than as measurement error, inter-rater reliability was not calculated, and consensus coding was not sought.¹² Consistency was pursued instead through four procedures: independent coding of the complete dataset by three analysts; structured comparison of the three codebooks, with divergent readings recorded

in memos and the relevant extracts re-examined within the whole interview rather than resolved by majority; recursive checking of every candidate theme against both extracts and full transcripts; and retention of the audit trail. The number of participants contributing to each subtheme is reported in Table 1.

2.4. Sample size

Sample size was not determined by data saturation, because it presupposes a finite population of themes that exists in the data and can be exhausted, a premise inconsistent with RTA, in which themes are analytic constructions rather than pre-existing objects; the developers of the approach argue explicitly against its use as a sample-size rationale in this context.¹⁴ The sample is justified instead by information power.¹⁵ This framework considered five dimensions: study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy. In the present study, the narrow aim, high sample specificity, established theoretical framework, and good dialog quality all support a smaller sample size. By contrast, using a cross-case rather than an in-depth analytical strategy increases the required sample size. The full assessment is provided in Supplementary File 2.

For transparency, the trajectory of code generation is also reported. New codes continued to be generated up to interview 18; the final 6 interviews produced no code that could not be accommodated within the existing codebook,

and no new subtheme. This is reported descriptively and is not a saturation test: within RTA, the absence of new codes reflects the state of the analysis at a given point rather than the exhaustion of meaning in the data.¹⁴

3. Results

Reflexive thematic analysis generated four themes and 12 subthemes. Table 1 presents the thematic structure and the number of participants contributing to each subtheme. The themes cut across the framework: stressors, appraisals, coping, and strain are distributed across all four dimensions, with their correspondence made explicit within each subsection.

3.1. Social stressors and belonging difficulties

Participants were legally included as Romanian citizens yet described being repeatedly marked as different. Nineteen identified accent and word order as the markers, although no interview question asked about language; nine said the Moldovan accent “gives them away” (P1, P2, P5, P13, P16–P18, P20, P23), prompting self-monitoring. Even favorable comments increased self-consciousness: P5 reported that others called the accent “super cute and nice,” while also imitating a Romanian accent “so as not to raise suspicion.” A difference also appeared at the level of academic register; P8 explained that “although we speak the same language, in Moldova expressions and terms feel simpler and more familiar; here, at university, teachers use a much more

Table 1. Themes, subthemes, and number of participants contributing to each subtheme (*N* = 24)

Theme	Subtheme	<i>n</i>
1. Social stressors and belonging difficulties	1.1. Accent and language-based othering	19
	1.2. Uncertainty about belonging and status	19
	1.3. Avoidance and social withdrawal	17
	1.4. Bicultural familiarity as a resource	13
2. Academic and institutional stressors	2.1. Academic language and learning difficulties	24
	2.2. Relational distance and psychological unsafety	19
	2.3. Limited formal guidance and support	23
3. Mental and physical health costs	3.1. Fear of failure	22
	3.2. Emotional exhaustion and stress-related somatic symptoms	24
4. Coping and support strategies	4.1. Self-care and emotional regulation	24
	4.2. Family and peer support	24
	4.3. Future goals and meaning-making	24

Notes: Counts are reported at subtheme level and do not imply that every participant described each element named in the label. Counts are not independent of the interview guide; subthemes corresponding to domains that all participants were asked about directly (2.1, 3.2, 4.1–4.3) are correspondingly high. Participants are identified as P1 to P24.

complex academic language.” P24 stated that “there is a part of me they will never understand because of cultural differences.”

Uncertainty about belonging and status accompanied these experiences. P1 described anxiety about “whether I will be able to stay here legally” when bureaucratic procedures were unclear, and P21 reported being reminded of being “different, even though we speak the same language.” P13 recalled a tram inspector asserting that Moldovan students “came here to steal electricity and to steal in general.” Homesickness intensified this instability (P12, P20, P24).

Avoidance and withdrawal followed. Participants reported “closing in” on themselves (P7), avoiding speaking in class (P11), staying away from campus (P12, P13), or leaving peer groups because they “couldn’t keep up with their discussions” (P6). P7 avoided disclosing origin “so as not to be judged” and observed: “At first, I tended not to talk about what was weighing on me, thinking I had to look ‘strong’ all the time. That only made the stress worse.”

Bicultural familiarity was also a resource: P19 described Romania as a “natural choice” given shared language, and P6 reported that previous visits and relatives eased the transition. P1 described an intermediate position, as “Romanian from beyond the Prut.”

Two forms of uncertainty are distinguishable here: legal standing, which is, in principle, answerable by a document, and belonging uncertainty proper, a vigilance in which ambiguous cues, favorable ones included, are appraised as diagnostic of institutional fit, such that praise of an accent and instruction to leave it at home operate to similar effect. Accent functioned as involuntary disclosure, shifting concealment from origin to its audible traces and making self-monitoring a proximal response to anticipated devaluation. Withdrawal functioned as a response: it reduced exposure to devaluation and removed occasions when belonging might have been confirmed. Bicultural familiarity entered the same appraisal upon the resource side.

3.2. Academic and institutional stressors

Academic adjustment was cognitively demanding. For participants with Romanian-Russian bilingual backgrounds, this involved an additional step; P2 explained that “everything I read I had to translate into Russian to understand better.” Participants also described a shift in educational culture from memorization toward logic, argumentation, and application, and modified their strategies accordingly; one attempted to “learn the logic of each subject” after the first examination session (P3).

Teachers and peers were perceived as more critical and less relationally warm than expected (P12). P5 observed that “a student will never, or very rarely, go to a professor and say, ‘you hurt me when you said that.’” Some accounts linked these interactions explicitly to Moldovan identity. P1 recalled being told that “the Moldovan accent has to be left at home because here it is Romania,” and P5 described “bad jokes, lack of respect, superior attitude,” adding that “going to university each time was worsening my state.”

Formal guidance and well-being support were largely absent, and administrative procedures were confusing. Support came “more from home than from people at faculty” (P5). Where support existed within the university, it came from individual teachers rather than services (P7). Moldovan peers were described as more helpful than Romanian colleagues; P19 stated that they “are the only ones who understand exactly what I am going through.” These accounts locate the demands of transition in the discontinuity between two national education systems, and the resources for meeting them largely outside the institution. Participants described neither knowledge of what provision existed nor of how it might be approached; hence, guidance was appraised as unavailable, and the setting was appraised as insufficiently safe for the naming of distress. Misrecognition thus operated as a distal stressor: it constituted no adverse event in itself, and it withheld the acknowledgement through which support might have been claimed, leaving informal networks to discharge that function.

3.3. Mental and physical health costs

Fear of failure was widely reported and framed in terms of family expectations, migration-related sacrifice, and future opportunity. P19 described “an inner pressure to prove that I can cope and that I did not come here for nothing,” and failure was linked to return: “I was afraid that any mistake could bring me back to my country” (P14).

Emotional exhaustion accumulated around examinations, deadlines, isolation, and separation from family. P20 described waiting for results and “being far from family” as the point at which they “broke down emotionally,” and P9 reported failing a first examination “because of stress, although I was prepared.” Fourteen participants reported stress-related somatic symptoms. P14 stated: “My health has worsened since I am here: I catch colds more often, I’ve gained a lot of weight and I have gastric problems.” P5 described the university environment as “simply destroying me,” referring to somatic symptoms and hospitalization. Others described reduced energy, diminished motivation, and lower capacity to participate in academic life. Strain was thus reported concurrently in three

registers: emotional distress, somatic symptomatology, and reduced functional capacity, described as co-occurring and reported as participants attributed them, without clinical assessment. The appraisal of failure extended beyond the academic, with an examination result being appraised as capable of reversing a migration project.

3.4. Coping and support strategies

Participants described routines, planning, breaks, walking, journaling, sport, music, and emotional boundaries as ways to regulate distress; P1 reported that “daily routine helps me with physical stability.” Other strategies were avoidant or offered only short-term relief, including smoking and crying (P17), “compulsive eating sometimes, procrastination” (P14), and emotional suppression. P21 described a change over time: “Before I was ‘strong,’ I didn’t need anything. Now it doesn’t work anymore. I am forced to ask for help, which I don’t like, but I know it is better this way.”

Family, close friends, and Moldovan peers were the principal sources of support, frequently described as compensating for limited formal provision; P8 reported that sharing a dormitory “together with a friend from Moldova” eased adaptation. Future goals provided a further resource. P4 described university as “a form of freedom, of personal construction. I do not just learn; I become someone,” and P20 described discovering “that I can be autonomous.” Difficulty was described as formative, as “a useful transition, even if challenging” (P19). The strategies span the range the framework anticipates, from problem- and emotion-focused regulation to avoidant relief, informal support, and meaning-making. Their concentration in informal sources follows in part from the appraisal of formal provision as inaccessible reported in Section 3.2, and P21’s account indicates that appraisals of resources and the acceptability of claiming them were revised over the course of the study.

4. Discussion

The four themes describe a configuration in which formal legal inclusion coexisted with persistent social marking, institutional invisibility, and health-relevant strain, a combination not, to our knowledge, previously described. Several components are not distinctive on their own. Fear of failure, examination stress, emotional exhaustion, and reliance on informal support are documented across student populations, and the coping repertoire reported here is what transactional stress-coping theory predicts for any group facing high demand and limited resources.¹⁰ Diminished belonging, cultural mismatch, and depressive symptomatology are documented among first-generation and low-income students,¹⁶ and low uptake of formal help

is the modal pattern.⁸ Since no comparison group was included, these findings do not establish that this group is more distressed than other under-supported groups; the claim advanced here concerns configuration rather than degree. The model therefore accounts for the appraisal conditions under which the repertoire was deployed: legal contingency entered the appraisal of what failure would cost, and misrecognition entered the appraisal of available resources, withholding the acknowledgment through which support might otherwise have been claimed.

What appears distinctive is the configuration rather than any single stressor, and four features resist reduction to generic adjustment or to domestic socioeconomic and regional marginalization. First, the attribution was national rather than regional or socioeconomic-based: accent indexed foreign origin, and the devaluation it attracted invoked a nationality stereotype, as in the assertion that Moldovans “came here to steal.” Regional accent variation within Romania and socioeconomic-marked speech may attract comparable ridicule, but neither implies that the speaker’s presence in the country is in question. Second, participants described legal and administrative contingency, including anxiety about whether they would be permitted to remain; insecure residence status is associated with substantially elevated anxiety and depression among migrants,¹⁷ and has no analog for domestic students, however disadvantaged. Third, the academic difficulty involved discontinuity between two national education systems, including internal translation between Romanian and Russian, rather than the school-to-university transition within one system. Fourth, failure was appraised as potentially terminating a migration project rather than an educational one.

A fifth difference is structural rather than experiential. Rural and low-socioeconomic-status disadvantage in Romanian higher education is administratively constituted and targeted, including through earmarked admission places,¹⁸ so those students are in principle visible to support mechanisms. Students in hidden mobility are not: domestic classification removes them from the international category without placing them in a compensating one. The comparison therefore turns on which forms of disadvantage an institution is equipped to see, not on who suffers more. This is where the integration paradox noted in the Introduction becomes consequential.⁹ Shared language, citizenship, and cultural proximity did not reduce the salience of origin; they supplied the medium, accent, through which origin became continuously audible. The proximity participants described as a resource, in shared language and in prior visits and kin, was thus also the medium of exposure; a single attribute supplied both.

Cultural similarity is thus not a protective factor to be assumed, but a condition under which difference is more easily misrecognized as ordinary.

Belonging uncertainty and minority stress may therefore stem from administrative invisibility rather than from dispositional concealability alone.⁴⁻⁶ In classic concealable-stigma accounts, the individual hides a discreditable attribute; here, the institution withholds a category, and misrecognition denies the acknowledgement that would legitimate help-seeking. This aligns with evidence that concealment harms health mainly through diminished belonging and reduced social support.⁵ The chain these accounts describe therefore runs from a structural distal stressor, through vigilance and accent management, into appraisals in which demand was raised by cross-system discontinuity and resource depressed by institutional illegibility, and thence into strain. The role of accent within it is consistent with accent-stigma research reporting perceived discrimination, fear, and diminished self-efficacy,⁷ the marked speech here belonging to students the institution classifies as domestic; hence, no provision was keyed to the difference it disclosed. That strain was reported as simultaneously emotional and somatic is consistent with a revitalized biopsychosocial account.¹¹ The concurrence of the three registers, and their attribution to the same conditions, warrants treating somatic complaint as a component of the strain in its own right.

One feature bears upon intervention. The avoidance described was an intelligible strategy, reducing exposure to the devaluation associated with accent; its cost, however, fell on the very resource whose scarcity had prompted it, as the occasions avoided were those through which belonging might have been affirmed. Coping configured this way is self-undermining, further supporting doubts that individual-level belonging intervention can succeed where institutional conduct is unaltered.³

Three practical implications follow. Screening and outreach should be indexed to adjustment need rather than enrollment category, since students in hidden mobility are invisible to procedures keyed to international status. Belonging-based interventions are indicated, but are unlikely to succeed as an individual-level manipulation alone, their effects being conditional on institutional receptivity.³ And because accent functioned as the operative marker, institutional conduct around accent is a modifiable target in a way that national origin is not.

4.1. Limitations and future research

Four limitations qualify these findings. The design was exploratory and included no comparison group, whether of Romanian students from peripheral regions or low-

socioeconomic backgrounds, of international students, or of Moldovan students who did not migrate; the specificity claims above are therefore interpretive hypotheses rather than demonstrated differences. The sample was skewed by gender (20 women, four men) and drawn from a single host country. Somatic symptoms and health-service use were self-reported and retrospectively attributed to stress, without clinical assessment, so no causal claim is made. Interviews were conducted at a single time point, so the temporal ordering of stressor, appraisal, coping, and symptom cannot be established, and accounts of change over time, such as the revision of help-seeking appraisals reported in Section 3.4, are retrospective reconstructions. Comparative and longitudinal research should test whether belonging uncertainty, self-monitoring, reduced support access, and avoidant coping mediate associations between stressors and well-being, exhaustion, and somatic symptoms, and whether these pathways differ from those in domestic groups facing socioeconomic or regional marginalization.

5. Conclusion

Formal student status should not be used as a proxy for adjustment needs. Students classified as domestic may still undergo an international-like psychological adjustment when their trajectory involves cultural, linguistic, academic, and relational transition. University support systems should identify and respond to hidden mobility needs, which administrative invisibility generates, rather than relying on administrative categories.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (approval no. 2951/25.11.2024), and by the Research Ethics Committee of the “Nicolae Testemițanu” State University of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Republic of Moldova (approval no. 1/22.05.2025, following request no. 34/02.04.2025). The committees approved the interview-based study involving Moldovan students enrolled in Romanian higher education, including participant recruitment, data collection through semi-structured interviews, audio recording with permission, anonymization, and confidential data handling. All participants received information about the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, data protection, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants for the use and publication of anonymized interview data. No images or directly identifying personal information are included in the manuscript. All interview excerpts were anonymized, and any information that could identify participants, universities, or specific persons was removed or modified to protect confidentiality.

Availability of data

The qualitative interview data are not publicly available because they contain sensitive, context-rich personal information that could permit participant identification even after removing direct identifiers. Public sharing of full transcripts or interview excerpts would therefore conflict with the confidentiality assurances provided to participants and the ethical approval and informed-consent procedures governing the study. To protect participants' privacy, we

will not share any raw interview data.

Further disclosure

Part of the findings have been presented at a conference: the 11th International Conference on Applied Psychology and Educational Sciences, held in Iași, Romania, between October 16–19, 2025 (<https://www.psih.uaic.ro/icapes/>). ChatGPT Version 26.727.51351 and Claude 1.24012.9 (03c61d) were used for language polishing and editing to improve readability, under strict human guidance and control. AI involvement was limited to suggesting grammatical corrections, phrasing revisions, and summary revisions. We hereby state explicitly that AI was not involved in study design, data analysis/interpretation, or conclusion drawing, and that all AI-assisted content has been manually verified by the authors for accuracy and originality.

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