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Internationalization Beyond the Metrics: Listening to the Student Experience

Universities have become increasingly skilled at measuring internationalization. Mobility flows, partnership portfolios, diversity ratios, and graduate outcomes all play an important role in how global engagement is assessed. These metrics matter. Yet they often fail to capture how internationalization actually feels to the students who live it every day.

When international students talk among themselves, they rarely begin with rankings or strategies. They talk about language barriers, moments of loneliness, cultural friction, and the slow, uneven process of finding a sense of belonging. That **gap between institutional measurement and lived experience** is what prompted [*With an Accent*](#), a podcast developed at [Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore](#) to give international students space to reflect, in their own words, on what studying abroad really entails.

Across its [first episodes](#), one insight surfaces repeatedly: **internationalization is not a linear journey of adaptation**. It is a process of **renegotiation and personal transformation** that unfolds largely outside formal academic structures. Students experience it differently and at different speeds, but the work of adjustment is a constant.

Becoming International Is Emotional Work

In a Christmas episode, Mateo, a Colombian student in the [M.Sc. in Communication for Business, Media and Culture](#) at Università Cattolica, reflects on spending the holidays away from home for the first time. “I think it’s a tough one, the first time you do not spend the holidays with family, when you’re not sharing those intimate, close moments,” he says. “And I feel those are all parts of your growth as an international student.”

For Mateo, distance prompted a redefinition of meaning. **“Part of the experience of moving somewhere else,”** he reflects, **“is that you have to resignify what it means to be far from home.”** Over time, he learned that “friends can also be family,” and that unfamiliar traditions could still offer “that warmth...that light that you cannot describe.”

These reflections rarely appear in institutional narratives or performance indicators, yet they strongly shape how students understand their study abroad experience and how they evaluate the universities that host them. They point to **internationalization as an emotional process**, one that involves uncertainty and reflection alongside excitement and discovery.

Expectations, Reality, and the Slow Path to Belonging

That emotional dimension also emerges in conversations about expectations versus reality. Henry, a student from Mexico enrolled in the [Bachelor in Economics and Management](#) at Università Cattolica, describes arriving in Italy with clear expectations about university life, only to encounter moments of isolation. “For me it’s different to talk to people than to connect with people,” he explains. **“You can talk to anyone, but connecting... it’s hard.”**

In some settings, including larger classes or more limited forms of interaction, and while operating primarily in a second language, it can be difficult to feel at ease. “It’s really hard to feel good when you don’t speak your language,” he

says, “because you cannot express yourself as you would when you speak your language.”

Belonging did not arrive quickly. It came through time and perspective. “You just have to give it a bit of time,” Henry reflects. “You don’t have to make conclusions in the first days, first weeks, first months even.”

Early discomfort is not failure and adjustment is uneven. **Students often need extended time, and permission, to grow into their new environments.**

Culture Shock and Negotiating Identity

Several episodes explore how cultural differences are interpreted, particularly in academic settings. Liju, who also goes by Ruby, a graduate student from Taiwan, describes her surprise at the informality between students and professors in Italy, where she encountered a less hierarchical dynamic that she found empowering.

Ruby also reflects on navigating multiple identities. “Sometimes if I’m being Liju, I have more Chinese culture in my mind,” she explains. “And when I’m being Ruby, I’m more Western... I feel like I have different identities.”

Internationalization, in this sense, is not about replacing one identity with another, but about layering.

Why Listening Matters Institutionally

At Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, listening to students is not treated as a tactic to improve satisfaction scores or fine-tune recruitment messaging. It reflects a deeper institutional stance rooted in a long-standing **commitment to the centrality of the person and to education as a service to the common good**. That commitment is also reflected in outcomes: in the QS World University Rankings: Europe 2026, [Università Cattolica ranks #1 in Italy for both inbound and outbound exchange students](#), highlighting the depth and balance of its international mobility.

This perspective places students' intellectual, cultural, and human growth at the heart of the University's purpose. In this sense, **listening is not optional. It is a responsibility that shapes how internationalization is understood, practiced, and evaluated.**

Taken together, stories like these offer more than anecdote. They invite universities to rethink how international student support is designed and communicated. Orientation programs and advising structures matter, but they address only part of the international student experience.

Listening closely to student narratives reveals that belonging is cumulative and relational. It depends less on exposure alone and more on time, interpretation, and human connection.

There is also an often-unspoken audience embedded in these stories: families. Parents experience internationalization at a distance, relying on institutional communication for reassurance. Honest accounts that acknowledge difficulty alongside growth can help build trust more effectively than polished assurances alone.

Beyond Metrics, Toward Meaning

Internationalization will always require metrics. But numbers alone cannot capture what students themselves describe as transformative: learning to belong without losing oneself, discovering that identity can expand without erasing its roots, and realizing, sometimes unexpectedly, that a foreign place can begin to feel like home.

For universities navigating increasingly complex global classrooms, listening more closely to student voices may be one of the most strategic acts of leadership available. **Beyond the metrics lies meaning, and it is there that internationalization truly takes shape.**

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