Hungarian supervisors' perceptions of international doctoral students' linguistic and professional preparedness

Katalin Doró [1]

University of Szeged

Similar to global trends in the internationalization of higher education, doctoral programs in Hungary have also seen an increased enrollment of international students with diverse levels of readiness. This study aimed to explore Hungarian doctoral supervisors' perceptions of student preparedness, their suggestions for improving screening, feedback mechanisms, and parallel development of language and subject knowledge. Through semi-structured interviews with 30 supervisors, the study found that students show a surprising diversity in their skills and academic background; some are excellent, while others lag behind. Many participants expressed concerns about their international students' lack of necessary research skills, academic reading and writing fluency, and cultural understanding in performing doctoral-level work. This may manifest as difficulties in allocating sources, reading assignments, and conducting critical analyses, and on overreliance on AI tools. They discussed in-class and out-of-class options to enhance students' linguistic and academic skills, and subject knowledge. Supervisors also found the screening process inadequate due to technical difficulties, pressure to accept students, and academic dishonesty. To balance these shortcomings and ensure transparency, some programs engage in preliminary discussions with candidates or request additional written work. However, as they reported, the extra care put into screening and providing individual support requires significant time and effort from the instructors.

Keywords: doctoral education, international students, preparedness, screening, supervisors

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education is growing worldwide. It has a longer history in English-speaking countries, but a visible spur has also been discussed for doctoral programs elsewhere, including in Europe and Asia (Liu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). A general increase in higher education enrollment with the expansion and changing nature of doctoral education has been well documented (Cardoso, 2024; Sarrico, 2022). A number of factors play a crucial role in this, including financial, political, and educational policy decisions and a race for better educational and publication indicators.

Studying abroad is a valuable opportunity for students. They gain access to an equivalent or a higher standard education system than home, acquire a global perspective, improve their language proficiency, and become immersed in a new culture and, more importantly, an international milieu formed by other foreign peers and professors. Employers typically value

---

[1] Author's e-mail: doro.katalin@szte.hu; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-4839

studying abroad, which means better job opportunities and higher salaries for students returning home. However, the combination of study abroad and doctoral student status can make pursuing a PhD problematic for both the students and faculty. Although this student population has a higher level of maturity than undergraduate students, research has shown that managing the international PhD experience is highly challenging (Boutiuc-Kaiser & Symeonidis, 2025).

Student preparedness is a key component of the transition to universities. A wide range of attributes influences this transition, including academic aptitude, prior educational experience, subject knowledge, familiarity with the study program, language proficiency, self-confidence, willingness to engage, social and financial background, study and life skills (Soares et al., 2024; Trice, 2003). From these factors, subject knowledge, language proficiency, prior educational experience, and study skills will have a direct impact on the daily work of students with instructors and peers. They are fundamental to coursework, interacting with others, and engaging in reading and research. A lack of these often leads to failure, anxiety, early dropout, and extra work for instructors.

While the motivation and experiences of international doctoral students, especially in Asian and English-speaking contexts, have been well-researched (e.g., Li et al., 2022; Sun & Wu, 2024; Wu et al., 2025), very few studies have explored the experiences of international doctoral students in Hungary. Moreover, instructors' and supervisors' experience is clearly lacking in the literature. Using interviews, this study aimed to document how Hungarian supervisors view students' preparedness upon their entry into a doctoral program, what concerns they voice regarding a lack of common grounds for work, how they think screening could be improved, and how language and subject knowledge could develop in parallel.

2. Theoretical background

2. 1 Internationalization trends

Owing to the substantial economic advantages offered by mobile students, countries worldwide actively seek to recruit international students. These students usually pay higher tuition fees than domestic students do, which results in an important amount of money for universities. International students also continue to make financial contributions by paying taxes and promoting innovation if they remain in their host country after graduation. International doctoral students in Hungary, however, tend to return home or move to another country, seek new teaching opportunities in higher education or find a research position. Very few international students remain in Hungary, although there is no formal alumni follow-up at all doctoral schools in Hungary, so representative data are not available on this. A special group of students is made up of Hungarian speakers born outside Hungary who move for better education opportunities and/or mother tongue education at the secondary or tertiary level. While many of the adjustment challenges apply to them as well, especially if they move only for doctoral studies and not secondary education, they fit into the doctoral programs very quickly, are eligible for Hungarian grants, share the same or very similar educational background, linguistic skills, and subject knowledge than all other Hungarian students, and not labeled as international. For their background and motivation to choose Hungarian doctoral education, see, for example, Papp (2017).

A factor boosting Hungarian higher education internationalization has been the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program, founded by the Hungarian government in 2013. Its primary goal is to enhance international student enrollment and encourage Hungarian universities to attract outstanding foreign students (Kasza & Hangyál, 2018). The program, managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and administered by the Tempus Public Foundation, is based on bilateral educational cooperation agreements between Hungary and the educational ministries of the sending countries. Currently, more than 90 Sending Partners from five continents are involved, and the program is growing year after year. It received over 66 thousand applications for the academic year 2024/25 to 30 Hungarian higher education institutions (Stipendium Hungaricum homepage). The program provides full degrees and partial study possibilities in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs, mostly in English. Awardees receiving full scholarships, have their tuition fees covered, and get a monthly stipend, housing and medical insurance.

The goal is to admit students who are most likely to succeed. This will reduce attrition and failure rates and save time and energy that could be dedicated to other students (Owen et al. 2014). However, when admitting students, doctoral programs rely on a limited pool of indicators. Admission documents for Hungarian doctoral schools typically include study certificates, grades, motivation letters, short research proposals, curricula vitae, and letters of recommendation. Some doctoral schools require international applicants to request a preliminary letter of acceptance from potential supervisors during the application procedure. This ensures that the doctoral program, upon successful admission, supervises the student's doctoral education and research activities within the framework of the doctoral program chosen by the applicant. This is normally accomplished through direct e-mail requests from candidates who send their CVs and proposals. The most promising applicants go through an online interview in the spring, during which prior studies and research experiences are discussed, and directed questions concerning the submitted research plans are asked.

Doctoral programs in Hungary last eight semesters, divided into two stages. The first four semesters focus on the academic courses of the given discipline, research methodology, and refinement of the research proposal. This first stage ends with a comprehensive exam, including the evaluation of academic performance and discussion of the students' research plans. The second stage, also four semesters long, emphasizes research and dissertation work. This normally includes less in-class work, more research activities, and more individual consultations with supervisors. The successful completion of the complex exam is a prerequisite for passing to the second, dissertation phase. Students can request an additional year for research and have altogether five years to complete their studies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they received an additional state-funded year. Prior to 2016, the doctoral program included a 6-semester study period ending with a similar comprehensive exam, after which doctoral candidates had two years to submit and defend their dissertations. This program gave more time and flexibility to students, as they could choose to take the comprehensive exam even years after receiving all study and publication credits. A general tendency, however, is that international students strive to complete all requirements and receive a degree before returning home or continue to work online with their supervisor on the final dissertation writing.

In sum, the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship, along with other direct admission procedures, has contributed to a changing landscape of doctoral education. Some programs now have more international than domestic students and are dependent on the revenue received after

them. Internationalization has resulted in added values such as wider perspectives in class discussions, international cooperation, and more openness, but also often means a large time and energy burden on faculty if international students do not easily fit the curriculum or do not have the expected level of preparedness. Kliminka (2024) also voiced the concern that certain governmental regulations would go against equity and openness when making family reunions difficult or temporarily impossible for admitted students.

2.2 Challenges of doctoral education: international and Hungarian perspectives

Research on doctoral education has had a particular focus on understanding the difficulties and processes involved in pursuing an international doctorate. According to Herman and Kombe (2019), overseas candidates face triple challenges in adjusting to their new country, university, and academic identity as doctorate students in their chosen fields. Research indicates that being an international PhD student can lead to feelings of academic and cultural alienation, inefficient communication regarding needs and expectations with supervisors, and an inadequate level of academic community integration (Anuar et al., 2025; Cena et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Doctoral students face significant challenges in terms of publishing requirements. This may change between disciplines and doctoral schools, but students are either expected to publish a few studies in leading journals or produce more papers in less prestigious journals or other forms of publication. The high expectation from doctoral students to publish during their studies has become a global phenomenon that affects students across various disciplines and countries (Horta & Li, 2023; Lei & Hu, 2019). This pressure is especially relevant for those carrying out research in a foreign academic environment and publishing mainly in a language that is not their native tongue, and are therefore viewed as bi-literate academic writers (Langum & Sullivan, 2017).

The lack of preparedness for research and publication among international doctoral students is a critical issue. Many students struggle with the linguistic demands of publishing in local and international journals (Kwan, 2009). Publishing internationally is a pressure for academics, let alone for students simultaneously engaged in the demanding tasks of research and dissertation writing (Kwan, 2009). Those who pair up with their supervisors, form research circles with other peers, or are part of their home or host universities' research teams can meet publication demands more easily than those who do research and publish alone. However, in many cases, these practices may raise ethical concerns if supervisors request their names to appear on the paper or when doctoral students are listed among the authors when, in fact, no real contribution was made to the research or the writing of the manuscript.

Interestingly, while the pressure to publish is often viewed negatively, some studies suggest that it can also facilitate professional development if perceived positively. For example, Pappa and colleagues found that international doctoral students in Finland saw stress as a motivator to overcome anxiety caused by a lack of social networks, founding, career plans, and research practices (Pappa et al., 2020). A prerequisite for this positive view on publishing is adequate training in research, publication, and access to research tools.

Many doctoral students lack adequate general English language and academic writing skills. A recent large-scale study among international doctoral students in Hungary found that the participants felt that they had insufficient skills to start doctoral-level writing upon entry, but they developed in their skills and confidence with time (Phyo et al., 2023). The same authors

conducted small-scale interview studies to investigate the academic writing socialization of these students and found that source reading, a reading-to-write approach, writing practice, learning from poor drafts, feedback from peers, instructors, and reviewers, and formal writing instruction were key elements in their academic writing development in English (Phyo et al., 2024a). However, only a minimal number of students expressed the opinion that native speakers or writing tools could improve their writing skills (Phyo et al., 2024b). About half of the participants in this third study expressed some form of autonomy or willingness to take responsibility for their academic writing improvement. This shows that, while they are aware of their shortcomings, pro-activeness is not always paired with it.

Paul and her colleagues (2024) pointed out that a lack in information literacy is another factor that often hinder doctoral students' academic writing performance. Information access, information retrieval, reference management, and information analysis were the four large areas that the research scrutinized. It was revealed that many Polish doctoral students would need to develop basic skills, such as finding sources, evaluating the reliability of information, managing citations and referencing styles, and using online research tools. The authors promoted ongoing training and education programs, especially concerning online sources and tools.

The pressure to publish, especially when combined with a lack of preparedness in linguistic and research skills, creates an often-unmanageable burden for international doctoral students. Research has suggested that universities need to implement more comprehensive support systems, better communication about expectations, and a greater balance between coursework, dissertation writing, and publication requirements (Kwan, 2009). Additionally, it has been documented that excessive publication pressure may increase academic misconduct and researcher burnout (Haven et al., 2019; Suart et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Research and my own experience working with doctoral students in linguistics indicate that the level of preparedness with which students enroll in a doctoral program is crucial for a smooth start or in their studies, and the level of engagement they can have in coursework and research activities from the very beginning. It also influences their social and study-related interactions with peers and instructors. It is also important to learn more about instructors' points of view about the international doctoral academic journey of their students since they are the ones who support students, give feedback, design syllabi, and make informed decisions about program changes. Therefore, this study explores the following research questions:

1) How do supervisors see the level of linguistic and professional preparedness of international doctoral students for their PhD programs?
2) What are supervisors' primary concerns regarding potential lack of preparedness among international doctoral students?
3) What are supervisors' perspectives on entrance screening processes for international doctoral students?

4) What types of language and professional development support do supervisors consider most effective for international doctoral students and what feedback mechanisms do they find the most appropriate?

3.2 Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants. Altogether, 30 doctoral supervisors (25 female and five male) representing six Hungarian universities and ten doctoral schools, responded to the call. Balanced proportions were not considered regarding doctoral school or specific study programs. The main inclusion criteria were being a supervisor of at least one international doctoral student in the field of humanities (linguistics, literature and culture, and education) and having had additional experience with domestic and international students through class teaching, supervision, doctoral conferences, or examinations. Some participants were affiliated with two doctoral schools which also gave them a wider perspective to the issues discussed.

3.2 Data collection instrument and procedure

Data were collected between January 2022 and September 2024, using semi-structured interviews. Ten interviews were recorded in each of the three calendar years. Interviews lasted between 25 and 47 minutes and were conducted in Hungarian, the participants' native language, either in person (12) or online, via Zoom (18), focusing on their reflections on international students' preparedness for doctoral studies, ways to assist them in linguistic, academic and research skills development, and the role of the supervisor. The present study focuses on the first part of the interviews (typically lasting between 15 and 20 minutes) on student preparedness, screening process, language feedback, and skills development (see related interview questions in the appendix). Interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed using TurboScribe. Additional manual corrections were made to the transcripts, and full names were removed. Informed consent was obtained to ensure voluntary participation and anonymity. The names of specific doctoral schools and universities were omitted, and participant numbers (P1-P30) were used to protect their identities.

3.4 Data analysis

The dataset was analyzed using Saldana's (2009) multi-stage process to identify distinct themes. Both deductive and inductive coding were used to search for themes in the literature along with emergent themes in the dataset. A circular approach involved iterative initial coding, focused coding, and constant comparisons within and across the data, identifying 24 categories. These were refined through focused coding and clustering, which resulted in six overarching themes: level of linguistic and academic preparation of students, reasons for students' mixed abilities, domains in which language skills are hindering students' academic progress the most, measures to improve the language and academic skills of PhD students, feedback mechanisms on student work, and adequacy of the screening process. The QDA Miner lite software facilitated coding. English translations of authentic verbatim excerpts are included in the Results and discussion section in block quotations.

4. Results and discussion

4. 1 Level of linguistic and academic preparation foreign students bring to the PhD program

All participants agreed that students enter the doctoral programs with a very mixed level of preparation. Seven of them voiced mostly positive experiences and highlighted examples of outstanding students (see Excerpts 1 and 2). The common reference point in their cases is that these students were well selected, with an excellent language and academic background, a strong motivation to do well and gain recognition at their sending institution where they had a teaching position. They often had conducted research at home on a similar topic, beyond thesis writing and had experience with publishing.

> *Excerpt 1: They have very mixed levels. Some students are excellent and even start with better conditions than our Hungarian students. They have publications, they teach academic or English language courses at their home university. They write well, they argue well orally, they present well. So they come with the ideal foundation on which to build. (P17)*

> *Excerpt 2: My experience so far has been positive. The students I have worked with have the language skills to read resources and write articles. They also have a professional basis, with a BA and/or MA thesis written on a similar subject. Of course, they improve after getting in, but they have a good basis. (P22)*

The rest of the participants talked about their surprise and negative experiences with students' low level of preparedness at entry, and often even later in their studies (Excerpts 3 and 4).

> *Excerpt 3: Some are surprisingly weak. When I read their seminar papers, I did not understand how they got into the doctoral studies. (P29)*

> *Excerpt 4: We have a lot of students and they are very diverse. Some drop out in the 2nd year comprehensive exam, because it turns out that they cannot do well either linguistically or professionally. (P6)*

The participants named the possible reasons for this mixed ability that are discussed in detail in the upcoming subsections. When the question whether there is a difference between the level of preparedness between Hungarian and international students was asked, the interviewees provided a mixed picture. Some specifically stated that based on their experience with teaching local PhD students for years, they had a preconception what constitute common grounds for doctoral studies, which many had to reconsider. However, doctoral programs and instructors are doing their best to accommodate for the mixed ability groups and give additional support for those in need, as voiced, for example, by Participant 5 in Excerpt 5.

> *Excerpt 5: Previously in the PhD program, it was simply not an issue that we had to develop students linguistically, but we were faced with the problem that we had to, and after all, our system is quite flexible, and we had a Dissertation writing course specifically for PhD students. (P5)*

Some supervisors noted that they had had students who were similar to a BA student at entry level. This proved to be such a wide gap between the desired level of English academic proficiency that students struggled or even dropped out of the course regardless of the additional support received.

4. 2 Reasons for students' mixed abilities

The most obvious reason was the inadequacy of the screening system (see more details below). Some supervisors also talk about a certain pressure to admit students, as some of them come with a direct bilateral agreement between countries or universities, bring incentives to the university, or simply mean the survival of the doctoral programs if not enough local students apply.

4. 2. 1 Different educational backgrounds impacting students' performance

The degree of linguistic/academic preparation of students depends critically not only on students' general backgrounds, but also on their previous studies (see Excerpts 6 and 7).

> *Excerpt 6: We have seen differences: students who have previously participated in the Erasmus or Stipendium programs and have experienced another Hungarian university seem somewhat better prepared. (P2)*

> *Excerpt 7: It is very mixed, depending on which part of the world or university they come from. But even more determinative is the type of academic background they have. (P14)*

Some participants explained that students who come from Europe or had taken part in Erasmus or other Hungarian study programs are better adapted to the requirements of the Hungarian education system because they have already gained experience with European or local academic norms, which gives them an advantage in doctoral studies compared to those who come from outside Europe. Other students bring their international perspective from having done their BA or MA studies elsewhere which also equips them with more readiness for the multilingual and multicultural doctoral environment. Some supervisors interviewed for this study indicated that they are more prepared for this diversity if they taught about or had had training in intercultural communication, had international undergraduate students from the same regions or if they themselves had had extensive study or teaching experience abroad.

4. 2. 2 Cultural differences impacting students' academic performance

Cultural differences often merge with educational perspectives and beliefs. This means that students can have very different understandings of what constitutes studying, research or dissertation writing (see Excerpts 8-10).

> *Excerpt 8: Cultural differences are enormous in terms of what is considered research and learning in Europe, compared to other regions. (P2)*

> *Excerpt 9: The other problem is that sometimes when they are admitted, it turns out that there are huge cultural differences in terms of what we consider research in Europe, what we consider learning, what we consider independent work. (P3)*

> *Excerpt 10: Many come from a university background where they did not have to work independently, the thesis or article writing was a mash-up of previous papers. (P1)*

Over half of the participants mentioned that at least occasionally they felt that they needed to pay extra attention to manage students' fluctuating level of tolerance for their peers' diversity in ethnicity, level of preparedness, involvement in class work or respect for the teachers. Cross-cultural communicative differences being key challenges in international higher education contexts have been thoroughly discussed in the literature. It can be an important issue especially when it comes to disagreement with the instructors (see, e.g., Cai et al., 2024). While some of these challenges are expected and are overcome with time, five participants noted that they felt or observed male students' unacceptance of female instructors' feedback or work at a level that they were not prepared for. As one instructor noted, "*there was such a confrontation that you were physically afraid, you were intimidated*".

In the literature and cultural studies, a basic understanding of European cultural artifacts constitutes common knowledge that is often missing from foreign students. This makes class discussion challenging. Although multicultural groups may make idea exchanges more vivid, as some participants voiced, this requires extra preparation from the instructors and may prove to be unproductive if foreign students are unwilling to share their cultural understanding or consider some topics to be culturally sensitive.

4. 3 The domains in which language skills are hindering students' academic progress the most

Two thirds of the participants voiced the concern that it is often difficult to pinpoint the source of difficulty because multiple factors may interact. A lack of academic vocabulary, technical terms, and reading skills often means that students are unable to read the assigned literature. Lack of language skills and understanding of academic English hinders students' ability to effectively process and synthesize academic literature. Students may complain about the amount of assigned reading, do not read enough in English, instead use a translator to get the gist of an article or an AI tool to summarize the main ideas in writing. This limitation also affects their ability to use discipline-specific discourse and argumentation, develop solid research questions and methodologies and admitting them and keeping them in the program for some university policy is unfair (see Excerpt 11).

> *Excerpt 11: And then it's hard to decide whether they really don't understand the language, or the jargon, or whether they haven't mastered this way of thinking at all. And if it's the latter, I think we're deceiving them if we admit them to the program. Or if we keep them in. Well, yes, now that's another education policy issue. (P5)*

Some mentioned that students may have good oral skills; therefore, they are able to participate in class discussions, but turning these ideas into written academic prose is a real challenge. Students may sometimes have the false image, especially if they compare themselves to their less talkative peers, that their English is fine, and do not need to develop their academic English or engage in critical thinking, as expressed in Excerpt 12).

> *Excerpt 12: There is such a false message that here it's enough to just produce the language and it's taken for granted, but there's no critical thinking, there's no content behind it. (P10)*

On the contrary, some are able to produce good written work at home or prepare for presentations, but they are unable to contribute meaningfully to class discussions or respond to

feedback at conferences. Overall, based on supervisors' reports, students show a variety of areas in which low language proficiency and lack of Academic English hiders their progress. In Trice's study American faculty members also found language problems to be the leading source of difficulty for foreign students, including oral communication and academic writing (Trice, 2003).

4. 4 Measures to simultaneously improve the language, subject knowledge and academic skills of PhD students

Participants were asked how students' language and content knowledge could be simultaneously improved. For most, this was a difficult question to answer in short, as language, subject knowledge, and academic skill development go hand in hand. Focusing on one often influences or depends on the others. Many interviewees suggested that integrating English for academic purposes (EAP) courses such as reading, writing, or research skills into their doctoral programs could enhance students' academic and language skills (see Excerpt 13).

> *Excerpt 13: Providing specialized language courses, like academic writing or reading, could help address the language deficiencies. (P17)*

This shows the recognition of the need for additional support mechanisms for non-native students that the doctoral programs were not prepared for based on the expected preparation level of Hungarian students. While some programs make it mandatory, others believe that they should be offered on demand and mention concrete examples of these implementations. The language courses offered by language centers appear to be marginal tools because students tend to avoid them (see Excerpt 14), unless they are built into their credits. The lack of pro-activeness in their own language development described by some participants resonates with the findings of Phoy and colleagues (2024a). However, alongside the dilemma of adequacy, instructors' free capacity is another key factor in launching a similar course. If students needed individual tutoring that the programs were not developed for, additional courses or consultations meant a substantial amount of extra work for staff.

> *Excerpt 14: Our program lacks a dedicated intensive language training course for incoming PhD students, which could address the gaps in academic writing and linguistic skills. Instead, we direct them to take courses at the university's language center…However, they rarely do so. (P6)*

Some participants were uncertain what measures would help mixed-ability students groups the most, but discussed their own classroom practices, such as discussing student writing samples in groups to improve self-reflection, integrating presentations into weekly schedules, integrating source searches with written summaries and oral discussions. The majority of the involved doctoral programs have some form of research seminars or student conferences when students present their projects in front of their peers and instructors, which seems to be a catalyst for improvement in a friendly environment.

Although there were no direct questions regarding students' strategies to overcome their language- and subject knowledge-related difficulties, a large portion of the participants interviewed in 2023 and 2024 mentioned the use of AI tools. While some forms of AI use, such as the translation or summarization of sources into students' L1, can promote linguistic equity

and speed up the learning process, a growing dependence on them may mask students' genuine language and content knowledge and may lead to misleading classwork and an unfair advantage (see Excerpts 15 and 16). As Participant 25 expressed, universities may lack clear policies concerning the use of AI, an idea that has been thoroughly discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Jin et al., 2025; Rajki et al., 2024).

> *Excerpt 15: You should not pass off AI's work as your own. This is this simple. It is giving some students an unfair advantage. (P19)*

> *Excerpt 16: Unfortunately, there have been times when the reflective essay or summary to be submitted in class was written by a student using artificial intelligence. I have consulted with colleagues about this, and we have come to the conclusion that it would be good to have a uniform university policy on this, so that it is not just individual lecturers who have to come up with steps to deal with it. (P25)*

Participant 30, together with other colleagues, also added that university policies trying to completely ban the use of AI are not practical or clear (see Excerpt17 below).

> *Excerpt 17: I do not think that a total ban would be a solution. Lecturers also use a number of tools that are useful for finding resources, proofreading, or organizing data. It would be important for students to know what is allowed, and what goes beyond. You cannot submit an article or dissertation in such a way that its major units are generated text. They need to be taught to use AI mindfully, to indicate its use in their submissions, to learn the difference between meaningful and unthoughtful adoption. But there is not always time for this in classes or consultations. (P30)*

Detection difficulties are paired with the fact that AI tools are growing in number and accuracy, and can also aid research and learning in a meaningful way. Students need to be taught how to use them appropriately and learn their pitfalls through examples, and training is needed on its use for both instructors and students. Recent research has pointed out this need for the continuous learning about and the critical evaluation of the role of AI in higher education and research (Abbas et al., 2024; Butson et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2024)

4. 5 Feedback mechanisms on students' written and oral work

The majority of the instructors highlighted in their answers that providing feedback from early on concerning their oral or written work gives students a clear message concerning at what level they are, and how much their skills and knowledge fit the prerequisites for the successful completion of a doctoral program. Many believe it is not their job to proofread and correct student assignments or dissertation drafts. However, they usually correct the first set of typical language or content problems so that the authors can see what needs to be worked on and expect students to do the rest of the corrections. Some participants voiced the concern that some of their students lacked basic computer skills, as they did not set the automatic language check in their documents or did not know how to open the feedback messages given by the instructors in a word file. This would require instructors to teach basic skills that they thought would be taken for granted at doctoral level (see Excerpt 18).

Excerpt 18: So, there are some skills that you would think are self-evident, and they're not, so you have to teach them a lot. Okay, we'll learn what proofreading is, and then I'll mark them in there with, for example, serious grammatical error, and then I don't necessarily write what it is, they should look it up. (P1)

The interviews show a large spectrum of how much and in what form instructors give feedback to students. In the case of written work, they tend to indicate recurring problems so that students learn what they have problems with, send them to language development courses, and suggest the use of proofreaders or AI-based language checkers such as Grammarly. Some universities offer free proofreading services to students through their libraries that check manuscripts or dissertations before submission.

As for feedback on oral work, they pointed out presentation technique issues that are helpful for later conference presentations or exams. A few participants pointed out that lingua franca varieties may make oral communication difficult but should be treated differently from basic language errors or the erroneous pronunciation of certain keywords.

6. Screening

6. 1 General adequacy of the screening process

When giving a short answer, none of the interviewees described the entrance examination process as particularly adequate. In terms of language screening, several participants, who also teach English majors at the undergraduate and graduate levels, mention that the difference between their doctoral program in linguistics and other doctoral programs they are involved in is that they are able to preselect students with strong English from among the candidates. They also noted that the level of language ability requirements can be significantly different across different programs. All participants agreed that the screening system, with a short research proposal and oral interview, is often unable to provide a sufficient predictor of how well the candidates are prepared or will fit the doctoral program. Some programs have decided to get into a preliminary discussion on the research topics with the candidates, but this may be in vain, as some of the best candidates will not be nominated by their country or will choose another university.

6. 2 Technical issues and academic integrity

Some pointed out that due to the online nature of the interview, technical difficulties may arise (time zone differences, unreliable internet connection, bad sound), often resulting in less time for the interview or even a positive bias to balance these difficulties. Some talked about the experience of interviewing and admitting candidates with excellent skills, and then someone else started the program (Excerpt 19). This form of cheating is very difficult to eliminate completely if there are no controlled interview centers in the sending countries. The majority of the participants voiced the concern that even weaker candidates can prepare for a short interview and read out or deliver very convincing answers (Excerpt 20).

Excerpt 19: So, what can you do when we interviewed an excellent candidate, we were very hopeful to have a good student, an excellent research topic? And then in

September someone completely different arrived who had low language and academic skills and we had serious problems with them. (P30)

Excerpt 20: You cannot accurately measure the performance in front of a camera...We know that there are some people from cultures that are very prone to drilling because it's part of their learning culturally, and they will nail it and they will dazzle us with how good they are. Now we try to distract them slightly, and then we realize that it's not so smooth right there, but then we always think good-naturedly that they must have been nervous, or that the poor thing didn't think of it, but how much he wanted to do it. I sense this kind of bias on our part. (P8)

Excerpt 21:… so it's not really possible to make sure that the candidate is really the one who is being interviewed, and very, very often the internet connection is bad, these are always online interviews, it's always interrupted, so we can't be 100% sure of the fairness of the interview, there are students with many different names, and then the same name is not on different documents, so it's obviously not the job of the admission committee to check this, but sometimes this is the case at the end of the line. (P5)

From Participant 8 we learn about an important aspect of the screening process, namely positive biases and from Participant 5 in Excerpt 21 the possible cheating cases and the extra burden put on the examination committee to ensure transparency. In addition, the submitted research proposal could be only partly students' own work. In the 2022 interviews, supervisors' help and plagiarism issues were mentioned; while starting from 2023, a growing concern was visible for the use of generative AI in the submitted research proposals that constitute a major part of the candidates' assessment.

6. 3 Improvement of the screening process

When it comes to the improvement of the screening process, a few participants pointed out that even with a limited number of submitted documents at hand, time and attention dedicated to their review can make a substantial difference. For example, Participant 10 noted in Excerpt 22 below to have spotted documents that did not belong to the candidate, some found a substantial amount of plagiarism in the thesis submitted as sample writing or in the proposal itself.

Excerpt 22: Time must be spent on it. But obviously one person cannot filter them all out. So I usually go through everything that comes to me very carefully, but sometimes I have to spend an hour and a half with a student. So, for example, there was more than one student whose thesis, MA thesis, 40 percent of it was plagiarism. So I do not think that those students should be admitted. Because that is a very serious problem. (P10)

The interviewees noted an improvement in the universities' ability to assess candidates' professional preparedness over time, including pre-screening, more transparent evaluation criteria, and the assignment of a potential supervisor prior to the oral interview (see Excerpts 23-25). However, they also believed that some students still entered the program without being fully prepared, as voiced by Participant 3 below. A lack of linguistic and academic readiness, together with differences in learning expectations and social isolation is a major concern in other universities worldwide as discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Hawari et a., 2022; Ma, 2021). However, it is important to note that this is not simple a discourse of deficit model

discussed by Zeegers and Baron (2008) that would assign automatically lack of skills to non-western students and participants discussed their general openness towards international students, but when certain basic linguistic and content knowledge is missing, it is very hard to build on it.

> Excerpt 23: I think ... as time goes on, we are getting better at screening candidates. (P3)

> Excerpt 24: We read the research proposals and ask those we think are good to submit a more detailed or revised version based on our comments. This way we can also see whether they are serious about applying to us. It is easier to see the level at which the applicant is and whether they have really written the research plan themselves. So a preliminary consultation takes place. (P28)

> Excerpt 25: Concerning the proposal, we have already put the criteria on our website, so that they should write [their proposal] according to that, and they can contact us earlier, and then we have these preliminary discussions, so we can get a lot of impressions about them". (P5)

Those who mentioned the concern with the over-reliance on AI-based writing tools for proposal writing stated that they try to screen the proposals for AI use, but if the instructors do not have access to a reliable AI detector or there is a lack of clear institutional policies suspected AI use cannot be the reason to turn candidates down. However, AI-generated or refined texts often lack clarity, cohesion, and detailed, feasible research plans. When asked to refine these proposals, the candidates may resubmit a very similar text or come up with a new topic in a short time, using similar writing techniques. This constitutes a red flag for instructors. While AI tools have revolutionalized the way academic research and writing are done, it has serious concerns if students use it as a shortcut, skip stages of deep learning, only superficially engage in their research topics and lack a depth of analysis. Supervisors' concerns regarding AI-based writing substituting for reading and critical thinking resonates with international literature (see, e.g., Liu, 2025; Sullivan et al., 2023).

7. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore Hungarian doctoral supervisors' perceptions of international students' preparedness, their suggestions for improving the screening process, feedback mechanisms, and the parallel development of language and subject knowledge. It was found that the majority of the participants perceived significant differences between international and Hungarian students in terms of academic preparation or performance. The results indicated that supervisors are frequently concerned that many international students do not have the necessary research skills, academic writing fluency, and cultural understanding to perform doctoral-level work, while others are excellent and on par with local students. This lack of preparedness can be seen in a variety of ways, including difficulties in allocating sources, reading assignments, formulating research questions, and doing critical analyses. Furthermore, they may struggle with academic writing, which can make it difficult to properly communicate their ideas and research findings. Factors that may contribute to this apparent lack of preparedness may also include differences in academic expectations, such as the level of independence required, issues with academic honesty, and overreliance on AI tools. Participants also voiced their concerns

regarding the inadequacy of the screening process. To get a better picture of the candidates, some programs have decided to enter into a preliminary discussion with the candidates concerning their planned research or ask for additional written work. With extra care concerning screening and preparedness issues, instructors often find themselves dedicating much time and effort in selecting the best candidates and assuring that they develop their language and content knowledge. This can only be done to a certain degree in class, but additional academic writing or research skills courses may not always prove to be adequate for all or simply do not fit the instructors' work capacity.

A major shortcoming of this research lies in the limited number of participants, although interview data may reveal experience and believes that quantitative data cannot. Data interpretation was limited because the researcher is also involved in doctoral supervision, which could have resulted in biases in data coding. As it is believed that the interview format can result in rich data, future qualitative research with supervisors from other fields of study and supervisors with non-Hungarian languages and cultural backgrounds would add to the discussion on international doctoral students. Students' own experiences should be explored further, as they may have a substantially different understanding of their study experience and doctoral work.

A key implication of this study is the need for a careful screening of candidates and early and systematic feedback on their progress in the doctoral program. This may include additional steps taken such as asking for clarifications or rewriting of the research plan during the application process, and giving more direct feedback to weaker students so that they can better evaluate their own progress. If needed, low achievers need to be selected out so that they are not undermining work with other students or taking instructors' energy in vain. AI-based writing assistance tools are spreding and academic honesty issues are expected to prevail in the future, so clear guidelines on what constitutes accepted academic work and how technology can be integrated in research should be systematically reviewed with students and instructors. Supervisors need more support from universities in working with linguistically and culturally such diverse groups of students, as best efforts and growing experience are often not enough to close the gap.

References

Abbas, M., Jam, F. A., & Khan, T. I. (2024). Is it harmful or helpful? Examining the causes and consequences of generative AI usage among university students. International *Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 21*(10). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00444-7

Anuar, N. A. A., Ibnu, I. N., Ayub, S. H., Zulkefli, M. Y., Anuar, N., & Serip Mohamad, N. H. (2025). Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) in academic supervision: Insights into international postgraduate experiences in Malaysian universities. *Intercultural Education*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2025.2465018

Boutiuc-Kaiser, A., & Symeonidis, V. (2025). Internationalising doctoral education: International PhD students' experiences of academic mobility in Germany. *Academia, 38*, 25–48. https://doi.org/10.26220/aca.5074

Butson, R., & Spronken-Smith, R. (2024). AI and its implications for research in higher education: a critical dialogue. *Higher Education Research & Development, 43*(3), 563–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2280200

Cai, C., Ebsworth, M. E., & Ebsworth, T. J. (2024). Disagreeing with your professor: Exploring Chinese and American graduate students' intercultural pragmatic strategies. *Journal of International Students, 14*(4), 1064-1085. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6838

Cardoso, S. (2024). The transformation of doctoral education: Responding to the needs and expectations of society and candidates. *Teaching in Higher Education, 29*(8), 2205–2215. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2306255

Cena, E., Burns, S., & Wilson, P. (2021). Sense of Belonging and the Intercultural and Academic Experiences Among International Students at a University in Northern Ireland . *Journal of International Students, 11*(4), 812-831. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2541

Haven, T. L., Bouter, L. M., Smulders, Y. M., & Tijdink, J. K. (2019). Perceived publication pressure in Amsterdam: Survey of all disciplinary fields and academic ranks. *PLOS ONE*, *14*(6), e0217931. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0217931

Hawari, O. M. D. A., Al-Shboul, Y., & Huwari, I. F. (2022). Supervisors' perspectives on graduate students' problems in academic writing. *European Journal of Educational Research, 11*(1), 545–556. https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.11.1.545

Herman, C., & Meki Kombe, C. L. (2018). The role of social networks in the transitional experiences of international African doctoral students at one university in South Africa. *Higher Education Research & Development, 38*(3), 508–521. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556618

Horta, H., & Li, H. (2023). Nothing but publishing: The overriding goal of PhD students in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(2), 263–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2131764

Jin, Y., Yan, L., Echeverria, V., Gašević, D., & Martinez-Maldonado, R. (2025). Generative AI in higher education: A global perspective of institutional adoption policies and guidelines. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, 8*, 100348. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100348

Kasza, G., & Hangyál, Zs. (2018). *Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship holders' expectations and attitudes*. Tempus Public Foundation.

Klimkina, E. (2024) Internationalization in Hungary: Stepping forward or backward? In Smith, s. (Ed.), *Equitable Higher Education in Times of Disruption. Proceedings of the 2024 WES-CIHE Summer Institute* (pp. 6–8). Boston College, Center for International Higher Education.

Langum, V., & Sullivan, K. P. H. (2017). Writing academic English as a doctoral student in Sweden: Narrative perspectives. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *35*, 20–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.12.004

Lei, J., & Hu, G. (2019). Doctoral candidates' dual role as student and expert scholarly writer: An activity theory perspective. *English for Specific Purposes*, *54*, 62–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2018.12.003

Li, B., Jiang, W., & Chakma, U. (2022). Negotiating identities in western academia: An autoethnographic study of international doctoral students in Australia. *Higher Education Research and Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2082388

Liu, L. (2025). AI and the crisis of legitimacy in higher education. *American Journal of STEM Education, 4*, 16–26.

Liu, Y., Zhang, X., & Dai, K. (2024). Mapping the terrain of global research trajectory of international doctoral students: A bibliometric review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2396356

Ma, L. P. F. (2021). Writing in English as an additional language: Challenges encountered by doctoral students. *Higher Education Research & Development, 40*(6), 1176–1190. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1809354

OECD (2024). Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en

Owen, J., Quirk, K., & Rodolfa, E. (2014). Selecting graduate students: Doctoral program and internship admissions. *The Oxford handbook of education and training in professional psychology*. In W. B. Johnson & N. J. Kaslow (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of education and training in professional psychology* (pp. 237–250). Oxford University Press.

Papp, Z. A. (2017). Kárpátaljai hallgatók doktori képzésbe kerülésének motivációi: Kísérlet egy doktorandusz tipológiára In: Pusztai, G., Márkus, Zs. (eds.), *Szülőföldön magyarul: Iskolák és diákok a határon túl* (pp. 164-186). Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó.

Pappa, S., Elomaa, M., & Perälä-Littunen, S. (2020). Sources of stress and scholarly identity: The case of international doctoral students of education in Finland. *Higher Education*, *80*(1), 173–192. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00473-6

Parker, J.L., Richard, V.M., Acabá, A. et al. Negotiating Meaning with Machines: AI's Role in Doctoral Writing Pedagogy. International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40593-024-00425-x

Paul, M., Deja, M., Kisilowska-Szurmińska, M., Głowacka, E., Świgoń, M., & Wojciechowska, M. (2024). Understanding information literacy among doctoral students: An ILDoc model and assessment tool. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 50*(2), 102855.

Phyo, W.M., Nikolov, M., & Hódi, Á. (2023). How international doctoral students' fields of study, proficiency in English and gender interact with their sense of making progress in English academic writing abilities. *PLoS ONE 18*(12), e0296186. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296186

Phyo, W. M., Nikolov, M., & Hódi, Á. (2024a). International doctoral students' socialization into English academic writing proficiency. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2429428

Phyo, W. M., Nikolov, M., & Hódi, Á. (2024b). What support do international doctoral students claim they need to improve their academic writing in English? *Ampersand, 12*, 100161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2023.100161

QDA Miner lite software. https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/freeware/

Rajki, Z., T. Nagy, J., & Dringó-Horváth, I. (2024). A mesterséges intelligencia a felsőoktatásban: Hallgatói hozzáférés, attitűd és felhasználási gyakorlat. *Iskolakultúra, 34*(7), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.14232/iskkult.2024.7.3

Sarrico, C. S. (2022). The expansion of doctoral education and the changing nature and purpose of the doctorate. *Higher Education, 84*(6), 1299–1315. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00946-1

Soares, L., Townley, A. L., & Rahimi, R. (2024). Instructors' perceptions of graduate students' readiness. *International Journal of Online Graduate Education, 7*(1), 1–39.

Stipendium Hungaricum (2024). https://stipendiumhungaricum.hu/about/

Suart, C., Truant, R., & Neuman, K. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on perceived publication pressure among academic researchers in Canada. *PLOS ONE, 17*(6), e0269743. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269743

Sullivan, M., Kelly, A., & McLaughlan, P. (2023). ChatGPT in higher education: Considerations for academic integrity and student learning. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching, 6*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.1.17

Sun, X., & Wu, H. (2024) Surfacing the conceptualizations of international PhD student agency: The necessity for an integrative research agenda. *Higher Education 87*, 1569–1584. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01079-9

Trice, A. G. (2003). Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 7*(4), 379–403. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303257120

Wu, Q., Ji, H., Park, Y., Kim, S., Yang, J., & Wang, L. (2025). East Asian international doctoral students' role identity development in the United States: A collaborative autoethnography. *Journal of International Students, 15*(1), 61-86. https://doi.org/10.32674/v5mw5s39

Xu, L. (2024). Chinese international doctoral students' perceptions of publishing: A time–space perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education, 29*(6), 1482–1499. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2067473

Zhang, S., Li, C., & Unger, D. (2022). International doctoral students' sense of belonging, mental toughness, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 14*(2). https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i1.3432

Zeegers, M., & Barron, D. (2008). Discourses of deficit in higher degree research supervisory pedagogies for international students. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 3*(2), 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/15544800801929393

Appendix

The semi-structured interview questions (English transition of the original Hungarian):

1) What is the level of language and professional preparedness that international doctoral students enter the PhD program?

2) To what extent do you think admissions can screen or predict language or professional preparedness, and how could it be screened more effectively?

3) As an opponent or a member of an examination board, do you have any experience of other doctoral programs in terms of the language skills of foreign students?

4) Do you see any difference between Hungarian and foreign students, either in terms of language or professional preparation or development?

5) Do students, whether Hungarian or foreign, have a general or academic professional background that limits their professional development? In which area is this limitation most obvious (working with the literature, critical analysis, presentation, writing a paper, writing a dissertation, etc.)?

6) How do you think students' language skills and professional knowledge could be developed together?

7) Do you think it is the instructor's job to develop language or to give feedback on the language level in a doctoral course? For example, teaching the expectations of academic writing, or the presentation, or improving the language of the submission?

8) How do you, as an instructor in a course, respond to language problems? Do you consider it your job to correct them yourself, or do you just point out the language problems?

9) Do students ask for a language evaluation/review?

10) Is language development or language assessment content built into the doctoral program?

11) Are regulations clear concerning language use? Does your university offer proofreading services?