

Acculturation and adaptation issues among International students: Experiences from the largest Public University of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This qualitative study surfaces the kinds of acculturation and adaptation related problems that international students faced while they studied at the largest public university in Bangladesh. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed through face-to-face interviews with 82 international students. Findings show that in terms of acculturation, students faced homesickness, language barriers, socio-cultural issues and academic reactions to their new life. In terms of adaptation related issues, students faced psychological distress, practical issues like financial constraints, perceived discrimination and social exclusion. Considering these findings, it can be inferred that host language, social engagement, academic environment and hostel life play an important role in the acculturation experiences of international students. This study highlights the importance of host language in determining the friendships and overall adaptation of the international students.

Introduction

International students are not only a valuable financial asset to universities in developed countries; they are individuals who also enrich these countries with their diverse heritage and perspectives, thus serving to increase cultural awareness and appreciation. International students often undergo a diverse range of challenges while studying in foreign universities (Bevis, 2002; J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). International students bring with them a wide range of knowledge and skills across many disciplines, thereby contributing to the intellectual capital of their host country and adding to the work force. While it could be argued that their stay is mutually beneficial, as they bring a range of assets to their host country and in return gain higher education, a number of factors impact international students' acculturation (Berry, 2005). However, moving to a foreign country to study brings many potential challenges, and international students may experience acculturative stress (i.e., stress resulting from life changes in the acculturation process) and adjustment problems.

Students deal with different expectations of professors (Alim et al., 2017), stressing academic environment (Vitasari et al., 2010), piling assignments (January et al., 2018), in-ability to follow lectures and interaction with the class (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Adaptation to language is one of the common challenges faced by international students in any foreign university (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Another challenge is the difficulty of coping with the socio-cultural environment leading to cultural shock (Vitasari et al., 2010), alienation (Chen, 1999), financial constraints and prejudices, including racial discrimination (Taušová et al., 2019). There is evidence that focuses on international student acculturation leading to psychological stress, anxiety, depression and other related problems (Dahlin et al., 2005; Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2017; Nilsson et al., 2008). The literature shows that stress during education can lead to mental distress, leaving a negative impact on cognitive functioning and learning (Alim et al., 2017; Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). This may affect the overall performance of students, thereby affecting their daily performance as well. This has been pointed out as a result of academic stress (Vitasari et al., 2010) and social stress (Alim et al., 2017) and may also result in agitated behavior, frustration, anger and depression. However, most of the students manage to overcome these issues (Saravanan et al., 2019)

and gain confidence, making them emotionally and psychologically stable. Those who fail to adapt become homesick (Thomas, 2020) or fall prey to various psychological issues. Ibrahim et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review of the prevalence of depression among university students and reported the presence of overall depression in one-third of the students. Similarly, Vitasari et al. (2010) studied sources of anxiety among university students in Malaysia, and out of five anxiety sources, anxiety attributable to language ranked fourth, followed by social anxiety. The same study also concluded that language anxiety decreased the confidence of students, adding both their burden and associated problems. Another study examined the common stressors among university students and cited language barriers viable for generating both psychological harm and continuous threat to international students whose first language is not English (Chen, 1999). The literature also indicates a significant relation between stress and acculturation among international students, explained by one single variable, 'prejudice' (Nilsson et al., 2008). Another study pointed out that international students often experience tangible adjustment issues and psychological stress due to racial discrimination and gender-based discrimination (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2017). Moreover, international students often feel difficulties in doing everyday work, which otherwise, in their own countries, they are able to perform easily.

Approximately 3500 international students are enrolled in the universities of Bangladesh every year at over a hundred universities (Hasnat, 2017a). Among these, public universities host the maximum number of these international students in Bangladesh (Hasnat, 2017b). A recent study of Bangladesh university students reported that the prevalence of depression was 52.2% and the prevalence of anxiety was 58.1% (Mamun et al., 2019). Another study based on a public university in Bangladesh estimated psychological distress among university students to be approximately 28% (Islam et al., 2020). However, none of these studies map the challenges faced by international students in Bangladesh, to our knowledge. One of the largest newspapers in Bangladesh in 2017 cited that language barriers, lack of student dormitories and session gaps were the most common challenges faced by international students in Bangladesh (Hasnat, 2017b). The literature has underpinned that the lack of student dormitories pushes international students to rent out private flats, adding to their expense and often leading to financial strains. Language issues, on the other hand, are also well-established predictors of psychological stress, anxiety and depression among international students worldwide (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Anxiety among university students in lower- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh, is a growing issue and remains to be addressed (January et al., 2018). Consequently, this qualitative study aimed to understand the acculturation and adaptation-related problems faced by international students in the largest public university of Bangladesh hosting maximum international students in the country.

Literature Review

Acculturation and related issues

The pioneers of acculturation describe it as the process of change that takes place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact (Berry, 2005). In other words, it is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and

their individual members. These changes are said to be co-occurring on an individual level (psychological acculturation) and on a group level (cultural acculturation) (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In multicultural contexts, individuals experience change events in their lives that challenge their cultural understandings about how to live. These change events reside in their acculturation experiences. Amid the interplay of these changes, individuals face stress, which is called 'acculturative stress' (Pan et al., 2007). It is a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation (Berry, 2005). In these situations, they come to understand that they are facing problems resulting from intercultural contact that cannot be dealt with easily or quickly by simply adjusting or assimilating to them.

In the context of our study, the accumulation of the stresses associated with the cultural transitions that many international students encounter is described as acculturative stress. Acculturative stress may negatively impact psychological and sociocultural adaptation in the acculturation process (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Acculturative stress can result in international students reporting somatic complaints such as sleep and appetite disturbance, fatigue, headaches, increases in blood pressure, and gastrointestinal problems (Mori, 2000). Acculturative stress can also lead to psychological symptoms such as isolation, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness, feelings of loss, anger, disappointment, and a sense of inferiority and, in severe cases, may lead to clinical depression (Mori, 2000; R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, for international students, acculturative stress may impact academic adjustment, overall mental well-being, and anxiety and depressive symptomology, especially among those with limited coping skills (Ra & Trusty, 2015; Sam & Berry, 2010). Gholamrezaei (1997) demonstrated that higher levels of acculturative stress were associated with lower levels of self-esteem in international students. Furthermore, studies with Asian international students have shown a positive association between acculturative stress and depression (Dao et al., 2007; J. S. Lee et al., 2004; Pan et al., 2007; Yang & Clum, 1994; Ying & Han, 2006).

Social support has been seen to moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and mental health symptoms. A study conducted by J. S Lee et al. (2004) demonstrated that those who reported acculturative stress but had a high level of social support exhibited fewer mental health symptoms compared to those with low levels of social support. Berry (2005) also cited that social support may help reduce the acculturative stress experienced by international students and aid in adaptation. Ying and Han (2006) cited that social ties with hosts are very important for the overall adjustment of international students. However, ethnic identity, a subjective sense of belonging to one's ethnic group, an exploration of one's ethnicity, i.e. having knowledge of and a preference for the group and being involved in ethnic group activities (Phinney, 1992; Phinney et al., 2007; Phinney & Ong, 2007) also plays an important role in determining the acculturative stress an individual experience (Kim et al., 2014). The literature suggests that those with a stronger ethnic identity report higher levels of acculturative stress and that higher levels of ethnic identity exacerbate the negative effect of acculturative stress on psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2014; T. B. Smith & Silva, 2011). Thus, not only with hosts but also friendships with co-nationals are important sources of social support and thereby a means of reducing acculturative stress among international students (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Despite some promising qualitative research with international students, a gap remains in the literature regarding the impact of acculturative stress on the psychological (Tian et al., 2019) and sociocultural adaptation of international students over time (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Future qualitative research is needed to explore the lived experiences of international students to enhance their understanding of their acculturation.

Adaptation-related issues

For decades, universities around the world have been intellectually, culturally, and educationally enriched by the enrolment of international students, who bring a plethora of experiences, perspectives, and skills to host country institutions (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Overall, when compared to host country students, international students are more likely to experience anxiety, homesickness, and stress in adaptation (Fritz et al., 2008). Chataway and Berry (1989) referred to adaptation as “changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands”. Adaptation that is positive is considered to be instrumental and leads to successful sojourns, while negative adaptation can lead to unsuccessful sojourns (Brisset et al., 2010; R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Separation from close family and friends, lack of comfort and familiarity with different cultural practices (e.g., foods and social customs), social isolation, and challenges with host country language proficiency contribute to challenges with adaptation of international students in the new culture (Nigar G. Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). In the academic domain, language barriers can impact assignment writing, understanding lectures, oral and written examinations, and the ability to ask questions in class. However, their academic performance may be below their expectations due to acculturative stressors of studying in a second language and adapting to the new educational, cultural, and social environment. As a result, if international students do not overcome these stressors, they may experience decreased confidence in mastering their new environment, thereby negatively impacting upon adaptation. In addition, international students may be pressured by their family and sponsoring university in their country of origin to achieve a high level of academic performance, which if not obtained can aggravate the acculturative stress experienced by the student (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). Additionally, cultural norms, language barriers, and the nature of friendships in the host country may also impede international students’ ability to establish friendships and thus contribute to their feelings of loneliness (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Asian international students, particularly, may have increased difficulty making friends with locals compared to their European counterparts. Asian cultures are typically collectivistic, although there is large variation in the degree and type of collectivism among them (Triandis, 1999). In addition, international students from Asia, Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East often report significant perceived discrimination compared to domestic students or European international students (Hanassab, 2006; J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Studies have shown that financial problems are experienced by the majority of international students with contributing factors, including work restrictions in the host country and substantially greater tuition fees (Chen, 1999; Li & Kaye, 1998; Mori, 2000; Roberts et al., 1999).

Research has shown that international students more often than not struggle with culture shock as they move to and live in a new country (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Culture shock

has been viewed as the process of initially adjusting to a new cultural environment. Culture shock has been defined as the “process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment” (DiLallo & Lindkvist, 1996). Culture shock has an impact on several outcomes, one of which is adaptation. Research has shown that culture shock can either minimize or prolong the adaptation period of an individual in his or her new cultural environment depending on the emotional, psychological and/or physical stresses and difficulties associated with culture shock. One of the impacts of culture shock is on international students’ adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008). If an international student experiences culture shock, the likelihood of achieving a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is lower. Similarly, the likelihood of coping with daily stresses at school, home and society at large is also lower (Presbitero, 2016). Further practical issues such as accommodation and transportation have also been highlighted in other qualitative studies (Bradley, 2000).

In many environments, students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds do not freely interact with each other (Tran & Pham, 2016). Researchers agree that contact alone is not enough of an impetus for interaction and that interaction needs to be managed and facilitated to be successful. One potential risk is the feeling of resentment towards fellow students. Currently, there exists an alarming perception among some domestic students that the quality of education is lowered due to the presence of international students, that grades are negatively affected by group work with international students, and that entry requirements have been lowered for international students (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Marangell et al., 2018). Marangell et al. (2018) described that interaction between international and domestic students, if poorly managed, may also result in negative interaction experiences and subsequently lead to feelings of resentment by all parties. By being academic-centered, most interaction-promoting strategies ignore the social issues and tensions that the students bring with them and simultaneously disregard students’ fears of reduced grades, communication challenges, and conflicting expectations. Marangell et al. (2018) proposed that it is time for universities to move beyond the idea that internationalization strategies can be limited to either the classroom or the campus. Despite how well international students may do academically, there is consistent evidence that they are often unable to successfully integrate into the host community. In addition, interaction with the host community is a primary aid not only to cultural adaptation but also to student satisfaction and future employability. The community environment may, in fact, have a larger influence on student satisfaction than the university environment. As many issues in the classroom are born directly from community tensions, including racism, segregation, exploitation, and active avoidance of cross-cultural interaction. One of the ways that universities should work together with the community would be in establishing safeguards against exploitation. As living in a new environment is a double-edged experience, studying abroad could, on the one hand, provide students with good opportunities for personal and intellectual development and, on the other hand, might pose threats to their well-being, especially their mental health. Mental health risks among international students are even more prominent than among domestic students (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Method

This study leveraged an exploratory qualitative design to understand the acculturation and adaptation issues that live in a multi-cultural context.

Participants

The sample comprised 82 international students studying at a large multi-faculty public university in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Table 1 represents the respondents' profile. The respondents hailed from different countries, including India (22%), Nepal (20%), Bhutan (10%), Pakistan (2%), Srilanka (2%), Malaysia (16%), Maldives (4%), Palestine (6%), Somalia (10%), Iran (6%) and Australia (2%). There were 50 male respondents and 32 female respondents overall. Most of the respondents were in ^{the 2nd} year (24%), followed by the 3rd year (23%). The respondents' monthly expenditure ranged from \$100 to \$500. Most of them (37%) incurred a monthly expense of \$200 to \$300. The respondents were enrolled in diverse degree programs, including medicine (30%), dentistry (12%), social sciences (6%), business studies (13%), engineering (20%), arts (15%) and pharmacy (4%).

Table 1

Respondent Profile

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>N (%)</i>	
<i>Gender</i>	Male	50 (60.98)	
	Female	32 (39.02)	
	Total	82	
<i>Country</i>	India	18 (21.95)	
	Nepal	16 (19.51)	
	Bhutan	8 (9.76)	
	Pakistan	2 (2.44)	
	Srilanka	2 (2.44)	
	Malaysia	13 (15.85)	
	Maldives	3 (3.66)	
	Palestine	5 (6.10)	
	Somalia	8 (9.76)	
	Iran	5 (6.10)	
	Australia	2 (2.44)	
	Total	82	
	<i>Class Level</i>	1st Year	17 (20.73)
		2nd Year	20 (24.39)
3rd Year		19 (23.17)	
4th Year		12 (14.63)	
5th Year		14 (17.07)	
Total		82	
<i>Monthly expense</i>	\$100 - \$200	24 (29.27)	
	\$201 - \$300	30 (36.59)	
	\$301 - \$400	12 (14.63)	
	\$401 - \$500	16 (19.51)	
	Total	82	
<i>Area of study</i>	Medicine	25 (30.49)	
	Dentistry	10 (12.20)	

	Social Sciences	5 (6.10)
	Business studies	11 (13.41)
	Engineering	16 (19.51)
	Arts	12 (14.63)
	Pharmacy	3 (3.66)
	Total	82
<i>Type of Scholarship</i>	Full (without accommodation)	20 (24.39)
	Partial	30 (36.58)
	Others	32 (39.02)
	Total	82

Participant recruitment

The international students resided in two dormitories, segregated by gender. After taking proper permission from the hostel authorities, the lead researcher recruited all the international students in the male dormitory who were present during the data collection time. Similarly, the second author recruited all female international students from their dormitory. Additionally, some students were living off-campus in private dormitories or residential apartments. Due to time and resource limitations, we could not include them in this study. Hence, the study limits itself to international students living on campus.

Research procedures

First, ethical clearance was sought from the Institute of Social Welfare and Research, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The lead researcher and the second author then visited the dormitories continuously for one week at different times to understand the time schedule of the respondents. This was followed by collecting the demographic profile of the respondents (Table 1) and scheduling interviews with them at their convenience date and time while doing so. We developed a written informed consent form that was distributed, read and signed by all the respondents enrolled in this study. We also informed all the respondents that the purpose of the research was to understand their acculturation experiences, adaptation issues and how they sought help from while facing them. Before the interview, the respondents were assured regarding the confidentiality of participating in this research. We also obtained verbal consent before recording the interviews. Considering their convenience, we conducted interviews in multiple slots for all the respondents. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were also taken during the interviews, which helped us during the transcription. All the interviews were conducted in English language using a guideline that was developed by the research team and pretested among international students of other universities and accordingly modified. Each interview slot lasted

approximately 40 minutes to 60 minutes. On average, it took three to four slots to complete one interview with the respondents. The interview guideline had four sections: ice-breaking section, acculturation section, adaptation issues section and the help-seeking behavior section. The first section comprised general information about their feelings prior to arriving in Bangladesh and their process of admission, hostel allotment and experiences from the 1st attended class. The second section consisted of questions on their adjustment in the university and sought detailed experiential examples from them. With this, we intended to understand the process of acculturation among them. The third section asked for issues, the respondents faced while adjusting to the overall environment to gain insight into the adaptation issues they faced. The last section comprised questions on how they sought help to overcome these issues. We asked them to present detailed scenarios of how they felt and went through before seeking help and how the situation changed after they sought help. These questions were important to understand their help-seeking behavior. One issue we faced during the interviews was the reliability of the response, a student was giving. Thus, in the next slots, we also asked some follow-up questions from the previous slot to check reliability. Another issue was that some students were unable to express themselves clearly in English. This issue was experienced mostly with the 1st yearers. In such cases, we paraphrased the question and asked follow-up questions in the next slot to confirm their responses.

Data collection

The data consisted of audio-recorded interviews, verbatim transcriptions of those interviews and notes collected manually during the interview process. The interviews of the 82 participants were completed in the span of two months from May 2017 to July 2017. The interviews were transcribed by the note-taking researcher and not by the researchers who conducted them. The transcription process was started simultaneously during the data collection period, and most of the interviews were transcribed within 24 hours of conduction.

Data analysis

We employed thematic analysis to analyze the data from verbatim transcripts and notes of the researchers. This method was chosen because of its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and qualitative nature (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As per Braun and Clarke (2006), qualitative data collected by different ranges of questions, focusing on perspectives and experiences, could be analyzed by thematic analysis. Our analysis and interpretation of data were guided by grounded theory and the procedure advised by Braun and Clarke (2006). We created categories and themes during the analysis, which were guided by the literature and followed a deductive approach. Eight (10%) of the randomly selected data were selected for inter-coder reliability. These data were coded by the researcher, other than those who generated the themes initially, and the reliability was found to be approximately 84%. After finalization of themes, we developed data display matrices, theme by theme, to derive meanings from the data. Finally, we triangulated the data across the themes and compared it to the literature for the purpose of internal validity.

Results

According to the objectives of our study, the opinions expressed by the respondents can be categorized into two key themes: acculturation- and adaptation-related issues. Table 2 shows the key themes, categories and subcodes.

Table 2

Key themes, sub-themes and sub-codes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	
<i>Acculturation</i>	Initial adjustment	Homesickness	
		Accommodation issues	
		Day-to-day procedures	
		Availability of food	
		Adjusting with weather	
		Language related issues	
	Language related issues	Language barrier	
		Unable to follow class lectures	
		Feeling of low esteem	
		Impeding socialization	
	Social-cultural issues	Social isolation	
		Social homophily	
		Shyness and introvertism	
	Academic environment	Authoritarianism	
		Frequent verbal examinations	
		Teaching style	
		Student politics	
	<i>Adaptation issues</i>	Psychological distress	Unmet expectations
			Familial expectations
			Dormitory related issues
		Practical issues	Financial issues

	VISA extension issues
Perceived discrimination	
	Feeling of inferiority
	Direct verbal insults
	Prejudices
Social exclusion	
	Lack of social engagement
	Alienation

Acculturation-related issues

Initial adjustment

We asked the respondents to describe their experiences during the initial period after their arrival to Bangladesh. Most of the respondents agreed that the transition from home to living away from home was a significant time of their life. Generally, all of them agreed that the first few months were difficult as they experienced homesickness. However, few respondents referred to this period as an ‘adventure’, which started when they left their homes. However, those who had a history of living in joint families mentioned having felt overwhelmed and distressed. Most of the male respondents mentioned feeling ‘unprepared’ and ‘awkward’, the first time they arrived in Bangladesh. Conversely, most of the female respondents reported severe homesickness that caused difficulty in their sleep, and most of them ended up ‘crying in some corner’. Referring to this time period as a punishment, one female respondent mentioned:

“When I first arrived in Bangladesh, the first few weeks felt like a punishment. I was away from my parents, my home and my pet, which has never happened before. I felt so sad that I cried for weeks, did not eat properly and lay on my bed throughout the day” (Female, IDI, Malaysia).

Despite different experiences our respondents faced in their initial period after arrival, all of them agreed that the feelings of homesickness faded with time. For the male respondents, this time ranged from four to eight weeks. However, for some female respondents, the homesickness faded away within six to ten weeks, and many complained that the feelings of homesickness continued to persist until their first vacation.

Apart from homesickness, most of our male respondents mentioned accommodation-related issues as bothersome. They mentioned not being allocated the dormitory soon upon their arrival. Many of them

were allocated the dormitory within two weeks to six weeks of their arrival. Few of the male respondents mentioned being allotted the dormitory after six months of their arrival in Bangladesh. We enquired about the reasons for such delay, and most of their responses converged to lack of communication between the university administration and dormitory authorities. Few of them also mentioned the unavailability of rooms in the dormitory, as such they had to wait until a room was available. As mentioned by one respondent:

“Initially, I was not allocated any seat [room] in the dormitory. They [hostel authorities] told me that there is no vacancy. So, I had to stay in private residence for few months and follow-up ever week until I got place in the dormitory” (Male, IDI, Nepal).

However, most of the female respondents mentioned having reported dormitory directly after their arrival and not facing any of such issues. A few of them reported delays in the allocation of dormitories due to admission-related formalities at the university.

At times, settling in a new environment was difficult for many of our respondents, as they were not aware of accommodation rules and day-to-day procedures. However, all of the respondents agreed that during the first week of their arrival, the senior students residing in the dormitory oriented them with the do’s and don’ts, which aided in their adjustment. Similar was the case with food as well. Most of the respondents had trouble with the canteen timings. Many of them mentioned that the dormitory canteen opened at odd hours, which did not suit their daily schedule. Due to this, as they learned from their seniors, most of the students preferred ordering food from private canteens and having it delivered to their rooms. This resulted in increased monthly expense (Table 1).

In concurrence to problems in adjusting with the food, our respondents also mentioned having faced difficulties acclimatizing with the weather. Almost all of the respondents described the Bangladeshi weather as ‘energy draining’. However, students from relatively humid areas such as Malaysia, Srilanka and Maldives had no issues coping with the weather.

Language-related issues

All of our respondents reported Bengali language proficiency as a challenge to their adjustment in Bangladesh. A major problem described by most of the respondents was the limited English proficiency of the administrators in the university. Many of them were also concerned about hostel authorities understanding their accent. This led to miscommunication and was often reported as ‘frustrating’ by many respondents. In the words of one respondent:

“They [University administrators] speak in Bengali. We don’t understand that. They don’t understand English. This is frustrating for me” (Male, IDI, Palestine)

Similarly, all of our respondents also described that the lectures were taken in the Bengali language, which they could not follow. Many of them mentioned having made frequent requests to the teachers for using English language, and the teachers would speak in English but after a while, reverting back to

taking lectures in Bangla. This affected the comprehension of subjects for international students in the classes. Furthermore, these defects also affected their self-esteem and made them feel inferior. As mentioned by one respondent;

"The teachers also speak in Bengali, and when we ask them questions, they respond in Bengali. Sometimes, it makes me feel so low and inferior" (Female, IDI, India).

The language barrier was also described as a major obstacle for socialization by many respondents. The limited English proficiency of national students created a distance between the two groups in the class. As a result, international students feared interacting with nationals. On the other hand, for some international students, knowing the Bengali language was an additional skill. They seemed to be participating in the class almost equally as national students. This scenario polarized the international students in the class and led to groupings, where few international students, knowing Bengali language, would prefer to sit with national students, while other international students were left with 'envy'. In the words of one respondent:

"I envy those [international students] who know Bengali language. They are the first among us to be liked by the teachers. It is unfair for us" (Female, IDI, Nepal).

Sociocultural issues

Most of our respondents also reported having minimal socialization opportunities. This was mainly due to difficulty in interacting with national students. Moreover, many of our respondents also mentioned that the scenario was similar within the international students despite having no communication barrier. This was a result of the busy schedule, the international students entailed. As mentioned by one respondent:

"We are busy with the classes and don't have time to interact with international students also" (Male, IDI, Australia)

Apart from the busy routines, the multicultural mix in the dormitory often failed to attain synergies in adjusting and led to the development of homogeneous groups within international students. Thus, co-nationals would interact with each other, leaving out the minorities. As mentioned by one respondent;

"There are groups in the hostel. Students from the same country sit together and live together. I do not have any co-national in the hostel, so I am left-out" (Female, IDI, Iran).

Another popular opinion expressed by most of our respondents was that international students from conservative cultures are unwilling to mix with others, which is also the main reason for the lack of interaction within international students. Moreover, international students from religious backgrounds are often passive and shy away from others, which leaves them out and prevents others from making friends with them. In particular, this was more concerning for many female respondents and some male respondents as well.

Academic environment

Many of our respondents believed that their teachers showed a lack of concern for the privacy of the students. This was not particularly true for international students but was mentioned in general by many of our respondents. However, national students were described as 'used-to' with the situation. This was a demotivating factor for many international students to attend the classes.

For instance, describing a scenario, one respondent mentioned:

"Many teachers are too strict. I am not used to this. I am not allowed to leave the class even if I get a phone call from home. Instead, I have to seek permission from the teacher every time" (Male, IDI, Australia).

Many female students admitted facing similar situations when they wanted to leave early from the class due to some concerns. However, the teacher would point out at them and seek reasons for leaving the class. This was unacceptable for many female respondents, as they described the reasons as personal. As in the case of one respondent, who had a menstrual concern and wanted to leave the class early. While she was walking towards the door, the teacher called her name and threatened to deduct her class attendance percentage. She mentioned that, at that moment, it was difficult to explain her situation to the male teacher and as a result ran out of class, crying. In her own words:

"Once I had a menstrual concern while I was in the class. I wanted to leave early, but the teacher called out my name and asked me to tell him why I was leaving? How could I tell him? He was furious and angry. He kept shouting at me. I felt ashamed and started crying. Then, I ran away from the class" (Female, IDI, Malaysia).

For many respondents, the culture of frequent verbal examinations was also bothersome. They mentioned that it was difficult for them to memorize the concepts from the books verbatim. The teachers would only accept answers as written in the books. This added to the stress of many international students. Some respondents described this as a 'faulty teaching style'. They mentioned being accustomed to group work and assignment in their countries. However, the everyday verbal examination culture in Bangladesh added to their worries and decreased their efficiency. In the words of one respondent:

"We have viva [verbal examination] every other day. The teacher only accepts ditto answers, as in the book. This is impossible for me. It adds to my burden. I wonder why I am not allowed to explain the concept in my own language?" (Male, IDI, Sri Lanka).

Many respondents also mentioned that the classes are often cancelled due to the political meetings of national students. Since international students were excluded from student politics, many respondents considered this 'illegal'. One respondent, describing his grief on this situation, mentioned:

“Often, the student leaders come and vandalize the classes. The teachers [in these cases] immediately exit the class. I get so scared sometimes that I felt it was some sort of a riot.”

Adaptation-related issues

Psychological distress

A majority of our respondents felt that they were not obtaining expected grades in the examinations. This not only affected their self-esteem but also decreased their confidence. Many of them reflected that they were ‘good’ at studies in their home countries, which made them expect good results overseas as well. However, the rising burden of unmet expectations often leads to increased distress, anxiety and sleeping disturbances among many international students. As described by one respondent:

“When I was in India, I was the topper of my batch. Considering this, my family sent me for studying medicine. Now, I barely manage to pass my examinations. It makes me feel worthless” (Male, IDI, India).

In many other cases, students felt that they were not able to meet the hopes of their families. Their families had invested in their studies both at the financial and emotional stretch. Some respondents also mentioned that their families had borrowed money to support them overseas. This added to their stress, and most of the respondents mentioned being in a constant pressure. Due to familial expectations, many respondents skipped returning phone calls from home. They explained that talking to the family made the situation worse for them, as their parents constantly asked about the studies and grades. Due to this, many respondents refrained from sharing their problems with their families. As in the case of one respondent:

“My family expects me to get good grades so that I could go back on time and support them financially. I wish I could explain them my situation here. They always ask about how I am doing at studies. Now, I don’t return their calls. Talking to them makes me feel pressured” (Female, IDI, Nepal).

Apart from personal and familial expectations, most of the respondents also noted dormitory-related issues as ‘disturbing’, ‘annoying’ and ‘irritating’. Many male respondents complained that they would face sleep disturbances due to the loud music being played by their peers, next door. They explained that talking to their peers and complaints did not help them, as the hostel authorities took student-related matters casually. Similarly, many female respondents also complained that their belongings would often go missing in the dormitories, including class notes, books and money. Due to this, most of the respondents were in constant fear, which affected their mental health. As mentioned by one respondent:

“There is always loud music playing at the dorm, every night. I tried to talk to them many times, but it never helps because it’s not always from the same room. Its very disturbing. Next day when I wake up, I have tremendous headache” (Male, IDI, Bhutan)

Practical issues

A majority of our respondents were not supported by any scholarship. They mentioned having to pay substantially higher tuition fees than the national students. While on-campus part-time job opportunities were prohibited by the university authorities, the national students opted for part-time private teaching as a source of income. This was also not possible for international students due to language barriers. In addition, the monthly expenses of respondents were irrespective of their scholarship status. Most of them spent \$201 to \$300 on accommodation, food and other miscellaneous expenses per month (Table 1). Spending such amount on a monthly basis was worrisome for many of our respondents. As mentioned by one respondent:

"I have to pay a hefty amount as tuition fees. I also have to support myself and pay hostel fees, food expenses, mobile charges and internet bills. This makes approximately \$250 per month. This is a huge amount and puts extra burden on my parents" (Male, IDI, Srilanka).

Many of our respondents also mentioned that they had to process VISA formalities by themselves, and university authorities offered no support in such matters. They explained that applying for VISA extension would cost them one week of their time on average. This included documentation, application process, VISA fee and verifications. In addition, the VISA and immigration office was also far away from the university, which meant that students had to skip their classes, leave early in the morning, wait in large queues and come back late in the evening. As explained by one respondent:

"Applying for VISA extension is a big hassle. We have to get documentation from University, then go to the VISA office, pay fee and apply. After one month, they would send verification, which is another hassle. The special branch office (Student verification department) is very far from our universities, and they do not come to dormitory. Instead, they ask us to meet us in their offices. After a few weeks, when the verification is done, again we have to go to the VISA office and receive the VISA. The University does not help us in this regard." (Female, IDI, Malaysia).

Some respondents also mentioned having missed the opportunity to go home in vacations due to the VISA extension hassle.

Perceived discrimination

It is difficult to know whether the discrimination-related experiences of international students enrolled in our study are actual or mere misperceptions. However, there was a constant divide between the respondents who spoke Bengali language and those who did not. A majority of students from India and Nepal, who were relatively better speakers of Bengali language than the other international students, reported considerable discrimination than the students from other countries. They perceived learning the Bengali language relatively easier than other international students, an important factor for being discriminated. In their understanding, the nationals did not consider them international students or show similar respect and values to them as they did to students from other countries. One respondent succinctly pointed out:

“Both learning Bangla [Bengali language] and not knowing Bangla are problematic. Initially, when I could not speak Bangla, I was well respected by Bengali students, but I could not follow classes. Now that I learnt it and communicate with them [nationals], they do not respect me the same way as they did before” (Male, IDI, Nepal)

Respondents from countries other than Nepal and India also reported considerable discrimination, but their reasons were linked to studies and ethnicity. Many of our respondents described their experiences as negative when they were asked about discrimination. They explained that international students, due to their English proficiency, often do good in examinations and become the target of national students and teachers. However, few respondents also complained that their teachers would often make fun of their ethnicity in the local language so that they would not understand. As pointed out by one respondent:

“Sometimes, they [teachers] make fun of me in the class. They say something in Bangla and the national students laugh. That tells me that they are making fun of me. I heard them use the word ‘Kalo’ [Black] many times in the class when they refer to us” (Male, IDI, Somalia).

Few of our respondents also felt that they were prejudiced by the national students, teachers and hostel authorities due to their ethnic identity. This was common for students coming from Pakistan. They explained that many of their host peers never address them by their name; rather, they call them “Pakistani”. Another paradigm of this finding was described by one of our male respondents who believed that he intentionally failed by his teachers frequently because of his nationality. In his own words:

“I failed by many teachers intentionally. They asked me irrelevant questions in the VIVA. They asked about 1971 war against Bangladesh and Pakistan [...] It was kind of a harassment for me” (Male, IDI, Pakistan).

However, this perception was limited to male students only. Our female respondents did not report having been prejudiced.

Social exclusion

The international students were unaccustomed with the informal interpersonal style used by national students, especially in the class. Most of them explained having felt misunderstood and anti-social. This also entailed having felt that their personal space was invaded by the national students. In these situations, our respondents mentioned feeling uncomfortable and not engaging in further conversations. At times, their passive behavior was also misinterpreted as a negative attitude by the national students, leading to their social exclusion. Many of them pointed out that this informal behavior was common among teachers as well. As pointed out by one respondent:

“Sometimes, the local students directly ask personal questions like how much money do you spend? Or can you show us the picture of your girlfriend? I get very uncomfortable by these types of questions but

then I have to look kind also. So, I humbly smile and keep quiet. But then they call me anti-social behind my back” (Male, IDI, Australia).

However, many of our male respondents considered interacting with the national students superficial. They indicated that the national students were unable to grasp their sarcasm, rhetoric and jokes. Thus, they limited the interaction to course-related only. On the other hand, national students took this negatively and considered such international students as selfish and prevented any discussions with them. Few of our female students mentioned such a paradigm, while many of them mentioned that student leaders did not allow freshers among national students to mix with the female international students or help them anyhow. This led to the alienation of many international students, as clearly stated by one respondent:

“I was the only international student from my country. In my first year, nobody helped me because some leader told them not to mix with female international students. I suffered a lot. Sometimes I felt, I was the odd one out” (Female, IDI, Sri Lanka).

Discussion

One key finding of this study is that most of the international students mentioned being polarized into homogeneous groups due to language issues. Our respondents reflected a constant divide within themselves because they felt it was unfair for some international students to speak the host language and follow the lectures while others could not. This division is provoked by linking importance to the host language as in the case of our respondents because their lectures were being taken in Bengali rather than English. The inability to understand host language may intensify academic stress among international students and affect their adaption to new environments as well (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The findings of this study indicate that language barriers not only prevent socialization among host and international students but also create divisions between international students leading to homogenous groups, often referred to as ‘social homophily’ (McPherson et al., 2001). Conversely, cross-cultural friendships are crucial in negating stereotypes and developing mindfulness among students (Davies et al., 2011; Katz, 1991). Universities need to be ideal settings, fostering cross-cultural interactions and meaningful friendships, which can only be attained if a common language is used as medium of instruction.

Another key finding of this study is that the majority of our respondents felt a mismatch in their academic expectations to the actual reality of the university. International students expecting to perform well in overseas universities is in line with the literature (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). However, in our case, this mismatch in expectations triggered potential distance from their families, as they reported being less likely to answer the phone calls from their parents. On the other hand, sharing emotional and day-to-day concerns with one’s family represents one of the important help-seeking behaviors of international students (Nguyen et al., 2019). While unmet expectations of university services are associated with increased depression levels and poorer adaption (Nigar Gohar Khawaja & Dempsey,

2007), lack of communication with family may intensify homesickness and loneliness, thereby leading to social isolation and depression among international students (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Nigar G. Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Another critical finding of this study is the lack of privacy concern for students shown by teachers. International students come from varying cultures and may not be accustomed to the cultural norms of the host country. In such circumstances, understanding the limitations of international students becomes imperative for teachers in host universities. Many of our respondents referred to the authoritarian style of teaching practiced by their teachers. Whilst this may be common in the host cultures making national students 'used-to' with the situation, it may demotivate international students from attending the classes, as in our case. Particularly for students from collectivistic cultures, who try to maintain their sociocultural behavior, values and norms in the host culture as well (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011) to cope with acculturation stress. In contrast, teacher friendliness has been found to be significantly associated with student satisfaction with services in the Bangladeshi context (Hossain & Rahman, 2013).

Lastly, the majority of our respondents complained about not receiving adequate VISA support from the universities. International students in Bangladesh have consistently complained about their dissatisfaction with the services and hence reportedly lost interest in Bangladeshi universities (Ruhani, 2017). This is an important issue and needs urgent attention from university authorities.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study conducted on international students in Bangladesh that explored acculturation- and adaptation-related issues. This study highlights the lived academic, social, interpersonal and psychological experiences of international students in Bangladesh. Considering these findings, it can be inferred that host language, social engagement, academic environment and hostel life play an important role in the acculturation experiences of international students. This study also highlights the importance of host language in determining the friendships and overall adaptation of international students. The qualitative nature is the major strength of this study, as it provides an explanation for the issues faced by international students in Bangladesh. However, failure to enroll international students residing off-campus is one of its limitations. Moreover, the study can only be generalized to public university contexts, as it does not take into account the perspectives and experiences of international students in private universities of Bangladesh.

Declarations

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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