

## **Mental Health and Psychological Variables among International Students in the UK: A Comparative Study**

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**Abstract:** *There are many challenges faced by students travelling to other countries mainly for educational purposes, especially if the culture of their home country significantly differs from the culture of the host country. These challenges are considered as an adjustment to a new culture which may affect the students' wellbeing, academic performance and also their physical condition [1]. The mental wellbeing of students is an area of great concern as pressure is increasing [2], and home students as well as international students are affected. There are, however, different issues related to international students and this study investigates the challenges pertaining to Arab and non-Arab students attending UK universities.*

**Keywords:** *Mental well-being, international, students, Arab,*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Studies have shown that students from Western countries have more positive attitudes towards seeking help when experiencing mental health problems than those from other cultures [3; 4; 5]. However, seeking help when needed is especially important for international students; social support resources have been recognized as essential mechanisms for students who are not of the same ethnic origin as the majority of students [6; 7; 8]. Yet researchers have found that international students often seem to be unaware of the support available to them [9].

There is a possibility that international students may not even recognize that they have mental health problems as these may be closely linked to their emotional capacity in being able to deal with new and potentially stressful situations [10]; these emotions may be affected by their change of environment, where strong feelings of homesickness and loss of control may be felt to be normal. Nevertheless, the state of a student's mental health is a problem which may affect not only the student, but also their family, their fellow students and the university, [11] who found out that Chinese students suffered a lot adjusting in U.S.A universities. He also reported list of stressors such as uncertainty, anxiety, language barrier and separation from family.

It is important to understand how international students deal with issues which may affect their psychological wellbeing, and cultural values may play a role in the strategies chosen to cope with stressful situations [12]. International students are more likely to seek help from friends rather than university professionals [13] but seeking informal help from friends may be successful in reducing some of the negative psychological effects of stress [14].

Language difficulties can be a major source of stress as this may impact on academic success [15; 16]. International students are often high achievers in their own country, whereas they struggle in the host country as they try to deal with communicating in a foreign language [17]. Language proficiency may also have an impact on a student's social interactions [18]. It has been shown that stress levels of international students can be critical [19; 20] and is often linked to acculturation issues [21; 22]. International students need to adapt to their new cultural environment. It seems that the way in which they are perceived in their new home depends on the host culture expectations and the social stigmas attached to their nationality and ethnic group [23]. Psychological adjustment is determined by the understanding of the new culture, the desire to fit in with it, and the ability to adapt to it [24]. Other key stressors identified involve cultural identity, loneliness, cultural differences, anxiety and environmental factors, all of which can be described as culture shock [25]. The pressures specifically on Middle Eastern students to succeed also come from their families and sponsors in their home

country [26] and more recently there have been political issues, such as civil unrest, demonstrations, and violence, in many of their own countries which have caused more stress. Alazzi and Chiodo [27] report feelings of inadequacy and loss of self-confidence in Middle Eastern students which further impact on their stress levels.

Coping styles play a significant role in psychological health [26]. In developing successful coping behaviours, people can deal with problems and reduce levels of stress. Previous findings [28; 29] showed that there were cultural differences in the kinds of coping strategies used; therefore more studies of various cultures would be appropriate. Americans used behavioural coping e.g. (adapting behavior to cope with stress) whilst Asians used cognitive coping e.g. (putting problems into perspective) [29] Yoshihama [30] investigated various types of group acculturation, looking at coping strategies comparisons. The results of his study indicated that women from Japan were found to be less active than their peers from America. Taylor et al. [31] found that Euro-American and Asian students under stress tended to seek support from their families. However, Wang et al [32] argue that personality traits are predictors of coping styles and Lazarus & Folkman [33] find that individuals tend to use different coping styles depending on the stressful situation There may even be gender differences; Carter et al [34] found that male students had a more mature approach in coping styles e.g. (dealing with problem) than the female students. Wang et al [32] consequently found that those who used more mature coping styles had good mental health compared to those who used immature e.g. (people who cannot deal with problem) coping styles. There is therefore a possibility that female students may be those who are more susceptible to mental health issues.

Alazzi and Chiodo's [26] study found that Arab students tended to identify personal events as stressful and dealt with such stress by treating the actual symptoms associated with this stress. Coping strategies such as religious support, consulting family members and friends, In many similar situations Arab students managed to live by accepting their problem and finding solutions themselves [26].

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a quantitative and qualitative approach. Questionnaires were distributed manually and also were available online. For the qualitative part of the study, a semi-structured interview was utilized to provide more descriptive information on the challenges faced by international students (Arab and Non-Arab students) in the UK as compared to UK students, using two qualitative questionnaires.

Responses from the online questionnaire included 55 participants; 43 of these were international students and 12 were UK students. The printed questionnaires elicited more responses (n = 303, 152 international students and 151 UK students). The total sample came to a total of 358, comprising 195 international students and 163 UK students. Most were within the age range of 18 – 35, with just 10 % being over 35. There were 190 males and 168 females. Almost half were undergraduates, and 51% were postgraduate students.

Participants filled in consent form and signed it first and then completed self-report questionnaires. In qualitative part, 8 international students were interviewed using 3 questions and two qualitative questionnaires. The main objective behind conducting these interviews (oral, recorded and written) was to have detailed picture and enough information about the participant's belief and perceptions of their daily life situations.

For quantitative research, SPSS version 19.0 was used to analyze the collected data using descriptive statistical analysis as well as inferential statistical analysis. A series of Pearson correlations was applied to examine the potential inter-correlations among the variables. Independent t-tests and ANOVA were performed to detect the differences on selected variables to detect differences between groups (gender, nationality etc). Finally a multiple regression analysis was used to explore any link between predictive and dependent variables. The researcher has chosen the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as well as the semi-structured interview as qualitative research. The selection of IPA is essentially based on the description of the meaning that individuals from different ethnicities place on events according to their shared and universal life experiences. In order to emphasize this, Smith [35] puts much stress and emphasis on the semi structured interview as a means of collecting qualitative data.

The interviews in this study can be classified into three different parts. The researcher started the interview with three questions as a warming up activity. The second part is related mainly to eight

items conducted and recorded by the researcher. The third part is related to an additional eight uncompleted written sentences which the participants had to complete. The interview questions were adapted from Kaviani and Hamed [36] and were tailored in order to gain more data focusing on the use of metaphors.

In the qualitative part the researcher chose three different categories for thematic analysis which can be summarized according to the participants' answers. The first one is related to positive attitude (acceptance), which is whether the international students accept and easily adjust to a new culture; For example, an indication of an optimistic and integrative approach to coping and a stress-free life shows them using phrases such as "The world is beautiful" and "I want to be optimistic and look forward to a good future" they also use words such as "interesting" and "sociable", "promising" and "optimistic". The second category is related to moderate attitude, which could be either a positive or negative attitude. For instance, if there is negative support they are unable to interact in new culture successfully and there is passivity whereby people use phrases such as "I am unlucky and unfortunate" and words such as "unlucky"; or if there is positive support, it is easy to survive and they use expressions like "The world is a place where you meet people from different cultures but you just have to be yourself", or "Try to keep on top of things to survive". The last category is related to negative attitude (confusion) e.g., negative support makes international students passive and unable to interact in the new culture successfully (frightening and hesitation). They use phrases like "Lack of self confidence" and words such as 'complicated, confusing and unfair'. These categories are supported by Zhou et al [37] and Yalim [38] who found that positive participants were confident and assertive and easily coped in the new culture; the moderate participants were hesitant in adjusting and interacting properly in the host society; and negative people were self blaming, which is a significant indicator of stress and depression. These people find it difficult to cope in the new environment.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In total 358 individuals studying in the UK Universities (195 International student and 163 resident students; with 100% response rate) answered these questionnaires, with age level of three categories (18-24, 25-35 and > 35). In total, 358 students subdivided into 190 male and 168 female participated. On the other hand, the researcher has divided international students into two groups Arab which rated 110 and Non-Arab rated 85 with total 195.

The result for international and UK students indicate that international students adapt to their new environment and can make positive decisions related to problem-solving, as well as overcoming depression and anxiety. Though they are facing difficulties in adapting, they are succeeding in coping with the new environment. This is supported by Davila and Beck [39] who found that international students functioned positively to both social and cultural adaptation. There is no significant difference between UK and international students on levels of mental health issues. In some cases the international students seem to be coping better than UK students. There would also seem to be evidence of both male and female international students having higher levels of social and cultural adjustment than UK students. These are supported by Virta et al. [40], Rosenthal et al [41] and Sumer [42] who indicates that cultural and social support is not gender specific. International students were found to have higher levels of coping flexibly; this kind of flexibility reflects positive and active academic adjustment indicating lower levels of perceived stress. Tuna [43] and Yalim [38] confirmed the relationship between coping and adaptation styles as predictors of psychological adjustment. Both studies reflected lower levels of stress in international students and more acceptances of positive coping strategies. However, Ward et al [1] found that international students facing challenges and psychosocial problems in adapting in the new culture.

Results show that Arab students suffer less cultural stress than non-Arabs. This may be due to Arab collectivistic culture [44] presumably offering more emotional support. Alazzi and Chiodo [26] suggest that Arab students tend to use positive coping skills to reduce their problems related to their academic, social and cultural adjustment as well as acculturative stress.

Most participants have a positive attitude towards religion in coping with the new environmental surroundings. This is supported by both Ghassemzadeh et al [45] as well as Al-Solaim and Loewenthal [46] who found a positive relationship between religion-solving problems and types of

religion. They argue that religion helps many university students adapt to solve problems in various life situations. The present results indicate strong religious and spiritual beliefs among national and international students. Additionally, the regression results show that culture stress, coping flexibility, social support and coping strategy are significantly associated with the dependent variable of mental health, yet there is no significant association between religion problem solving and mental health. The results might affect the extent to which international students with psychosocial problems, such as coping flexibility and culture stress, which affects to adjust with new environment. Ward et al [1] emphasized those overseas students face challenges in adapting when they enter a new culture.

When asked if they enjoyed living in the UK, most were positive, although three gave qualified responses, reflecting their fear and anxiety. Three out of eight answered YES and added BUT... as conservative in dealing and interacting with colleagues (either home or international) in the same campus. This kind of personality reflects their fear and anxiety and selects them as dependent students. Two out of eight were shocked by the religious environment or perhaps the lack of it, where students live independently in their own culture and are used to closer family environment. Those reflect to the key link of moderate theme (blame) because they use phrases 'I feel lonely in the UK'. Four out of eight participants were found to be hesitant about being involved in the local community and suffer from both a cultural and language barrier. Only two out of eight participants were found to be happy, well-adjusted, sociable and comfortable with their new society both academically and culturally. Those reflect to the key link of positive attitude themes (acceptance) that they can adjust easily in the new culture. Sumer et al [47] found that international students can adjust without any signs of anxiety or stress. Two participants were found to be cautious and avoid facing any social or cultural problems which can prevent them from adjusting academically. They admitted that they are conservative, isolated and depressed. Lin [11] found that some Chinese students suffered a lot adjusting to American universities. He also reported list of stressors such as uncertainty, anxiety, language barrier and separation from family.

All interviewees were found to be dependent on their families and adapted successfully in the new culture. They had no difficulty in constructing social contacts. Sumer [42] indicated that international students adjusted and coped well and fitted positively into the environment around them.

Six out of eight were found to be negative about coping with social and academic life when things were not going well for them. They described themselves as unlucky, lacking concentration, depressed, agonized and stressed by blaming themselves in facing difficulties in life. Those reflect to the key link of negative attitude (confusion) that they find difficulty to cope in the new culture. Only two of the participants were found to be successful in coping and managing in these circumstances. Yalim [38] studied university students in Turkey and found out that self-blaming is a significant indicator of stress and depression.

It was found that five out of eight were positive in accepting their instincts and were willing to adjust easily according to their religious beliefs and in consultation with family. One of the participants admitted that *he easily can be let down and is considered to be passive*. Chelliah et al [48] indicated that family support was found to be helpful in assisting the participants' mood and motive to follow their instincts and accept the challenges of the new culture and new life situations. It can be said that instinct or reflection is considered to have been an extra source of support for international students to help them make the right decisions at a specific time.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

According to the results of the mental health variables and the interviews, it can be noted that international students seem to adapt well to the new environment, in many cases similar to UK students. However, cultural stress is still considered to be a challenge for international students, in particular Asians and Arabs. This is due to the fact that home and host countries are substantially different in their cultures. International students can feel discomforted, dislocated, and distressed as they miss their families, friends and relatives. Metaphors like 'Never give up, Unlucky and Living in UK is worthless...' were extracted from the participants' phrases during the oral interview especially and most came from the students more likely to have mental health issues. Thematic analysis was used to categorize them into three measurable models: acceptance, blaming and confusion. For instance, in metaphoric phrases like *I frequently accept facing difficulties* and *I rarely accept facing difficulties* it can be seen that the adverb 'frequently' indicates that the participant is confident and sure that he can face and solve the problems to a great extent. The adverb *occasionally* indicates that

the participant is hesitant in facing the problem directly and he is in need of help and assistance. The adverb *rarely* indicates that the participant may be likely to suffer mental health problems as he has no certainty or courage in facing up to problems.

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