

Original Article

Challenges Faced by International Undergraduate Medical Students in Pakistan: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Objective: This study explored the difficulties faced by international undergraduate medical students in Pakistan and portrayed their lived experiences.

Methodology: This was a qualitative study using a descriptive phenomenological approach. We used semi-structured interviews with students from five different colleges in Pakistan. The participants had completed their schooling overseas and had families living overseas. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or through video calls.

Results: The main difficulties faced by international medical students in Pakistan were seen to be related to culture shock, loneliness, and an inability to cope. Most students experienced loneliness and culture shock, yet their implications were not always disturbing. Yet, coping difficulties were experienced by a smaller number of students, and it affected them to the extent that they needed to get psychiatric support and were even on the verge of dropping out of college and returning home. **Conclusion:** Unless the challenges faced by international students who come to Pakistan for their studies are addressed, they will definitely be a deterrent for future generations of students who would consider coming to the country for studies from overseas.

Keywords: Acculturation, Challenges, Culture Shock, International Cultural Competency (ICC), International Medical Students, Stress.

Introduction

“Cross-cultural learning and studying abroad can be transformative”. Amal Clooney Globalisation is a process that encompasses interconnected changes in a society's social, cultural, economic, and political spheres, and despite its many fascinating opportunities, it has unavoidable drawbacks.¹ Among them are the difficulties posed by students' cross-border travel to pursue higher education.

This study's focus on medical students stems from the belief that they experience higher levels of stress and pressure than university students who are not studying medicine. Compared to the general population, medical students had higher levels of stress and sadness, according to a study conducted in Stockholm by Dahlin et al.²

The ability to foster intercultural competency, which is the capacity to communicate successfully in situations involving cultural differences, is one of the primary advantages and goals of international education. It encourages students to be ready to operate in a global workplace.³

In addition, intercultural engagement benefits both international and host students, especially the latter, by fostering an appreciation and respect for diversity as well as a knowledge of alternative worldviews.⁴ Research has indicated that students who undergo internationalisation develop more open, inquisitive, cooperative, and globally conscious behaviours.⁵

Universities in affluent nations benefit financially from having international students, who also contribute to the enrichment of these nations with their varied backgrounds and viewpoints, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of culture.^{6,7}

The importance of this study lies in its examination of the hardships, obstacles, and issues faced by foreign medical students from diverse cultural backgrounds who wish to pursue medical education in Pakistan. We investigated their coping mechanisms for culture shock. For the sake of the next generation of overseas medical students hoping to study

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Data Availability Statement: The datasets (interview transcripts) generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant privacy and confidentiality agreements; however, de-identified thematic excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board

Approval

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in Pakistan, we also made an effort to identify any shortcomings in the structure of the medical colleges in Pakistan.

Methodology

A qualitative design and descriptive phenomenological approach were employed in the study design. It took place in Pakistan and was completed in six months (July 2021–December 2021). The inclusion criteria were that the students had completed their previous schooling overseas and had families living overseas. Students who studied overseas but settled with their family members in Pakistan were excluded. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and principles. The Institutional Review Board granted ethical approval before the commencement of the research. Reference no. HBS/IRB/05/25.

Twenty MBBS students (eight female and 12 male) from five different medical schools in four different cities participated in the study. Three students were from the Riphah Medical College in Rawalpindi. Four were from HBS Medical and Dental College, Islamabad. Five patients were from CMH Lahore. Three were from the Agha Khan University, Karachi. And five were from RMU in Rawalpindi. The purpose of these students moving to Pakistan was essentially for their undergraduate medical education. None of them had lived in Pakistan previously and had completed their prior education elsewhere. An email containing a consent form was sent to each interviewee. After reading, comprehending, and signing it, they were asked to send it back by mail or e-mail. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used to collect data. The results are presented in Table 1.

Before obtaining informed consent, the participants were instructed on the study's purpose, and their participation was made voluntary. The confidentiality of personal information was guaranteed at the outset of the study, and the survey results would only be published or provided as aggregate data. Except for situations in which geographic constraints prevented in-person interviews, which were conducted via video conversations, the interviews were conducted in person. A digital voice recorder was used for all interviews, and they were transcribed before being analysed. Thematic data analysis was used to manually examine the data collected. Because it best captures students' real-life experiences without offering the author's viewpoint, this approach was found to be the most suitable. This study was reported following the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines, and the COREQ checklist is included in Supplementary File 1.

Table 1: Semi-structured interview Questions

1. Why did you first choose to pursue your medical studies in Pakistan?
2. Do you recall encountering challenges when you started your first year? What kinds of obstacles or problems did you come across?
3. Have you ever felt homesick or lonely?
4. Did you experience any financial difficulties?
5. Did you encounter any accommodations-related issues?
6. Did you encounter any difficulties during your travels to and from your home country?
7. Did you encounter any linguistic barriers?
8. If you have any problems, who do you speak with?
9. Did you have any pre-arrival expectations that weren't fulfilled, and if so, what were they?
10. Would you like to share anything further with me today?

Results

According to the findings of this study, the difficulties faced by international students are complex, and the aspects that are most important to each individual differ.

The data analysis yielded 11 subthemes, which were classified into five themes.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes on Challenges faced by the international students

	Sub-themes
Linguistic and cultural concerns	• Culture shock • Language constraints • Discrimination
Lack of assistance and coping challenges	• Insufficient guidance and support • Unable to manage stress
Unfulfilled expectations and daily restraints	• Unfulfilled anticipations • Incapable of completing tasks
Solitude and loneliness	• Sense of Isolation and loneliness
Logistic issues	• Dietary and food issues • Transportation issues • Concerns with accommodation

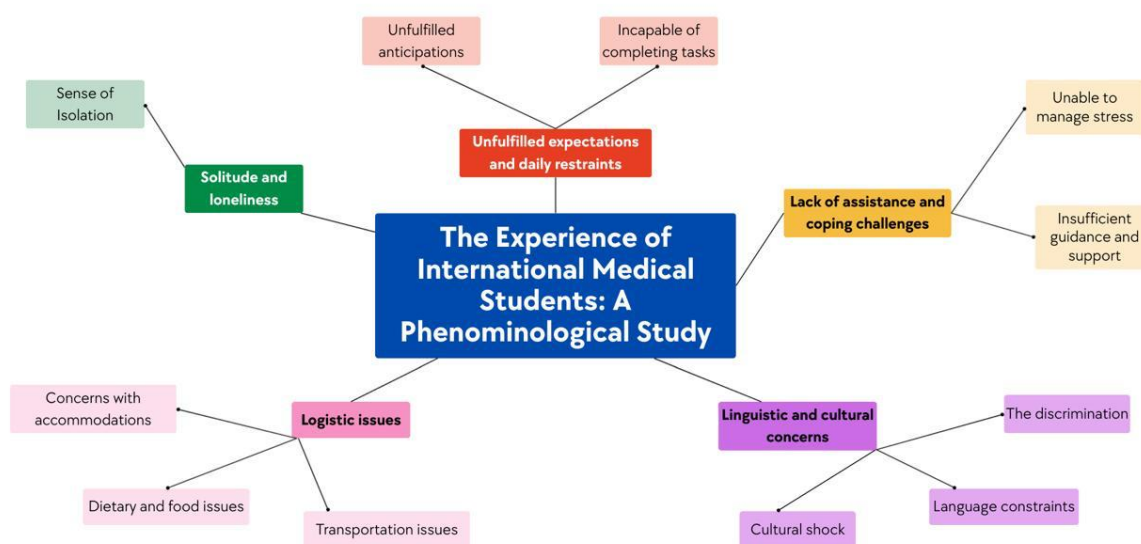


Figure 1: Themes and Sub-themes on Challenges faced by the international students

Linguistic and cultural concerns

Nearly all students experienced some sort of cultural shock. Some of them talked about how they were shocked to observe the way gender segregation affected their everyday interactions with men. Speaking to females was seen by one of the students as looking down upon. He thought that people here were excessively critical.

One of the students also shared her experience of culture shock. She expressed astonishment at the disparity in interpersonal interactions and the lack of mutual respect. The way people positioned or perceived themselves in these interactions shocked her.

According to most students, they initially struggled with English. In the analysis, there were nine quotes regarding language problems.

Since Urdu was the only language used, the students felt that they first struggled with language, particularly the colloquial form of the language, which made it hard to comprehend jokes, interact with others, and complete tasks in the class. At times, language difficulties even caused them humiliation.

According to one student, it was occasionally difficult to follow the classroom sessions that mixed English and Urdu because they did not fully comprehend Urdu. Another student added a twist to the language dilemma by claiming that the teacher's English was quite inadequate, making it hard to understand what was being taught.

Some students believed they were targets of discrimination or unwarranted judgment. People condemned them and sometimes attempted to use them simply because they perceived them as being different.

Lack of assistance and coping challenges

Some students thought that the absence of support worsened their problems. They thought they would have been better equipped to handle their circumstances if they had received assistance early on in the form of emotional support and psychological counselling. They believed that they were ignored, even when they sought assistance. A few of them thought that support had been occasionally available, but they were not informed of it. Some believed that there was no support system in place and that they had to make arrangements for it on their own whenever they needed it.

Among the students interviewed, two expressed that they had experienced moments when they were genuinely overwhelmed by the challenges and were unable to cope. One of the students felt stress due to falling behind in academics and thought that having psychological support would have been useful in getting through those challenges.

Unfulfilled expectations and daily restraints

Several students disclosed that their expectations before arriving in this country were shattered, both upon arrival and in the months that followed. Occasionally, their surroundings led to these disillusionments, but more frequently, their expectations of people, including students, teachers, and members of general society, were to blame.

A sense of solitude and loneliness

The majority of students experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation. The primary reason individuals had trouble finding friends or companionship was cultural difficulties. In the end, those who felt they could not connect with the local students, which was the case for most of them, became friends with either seniors or other international students in their own year group. Some participants also thought that contacting home to discuss loneliness with family members would upset them and make matters worse. One of the students was affected to such a degree that she felt the need for counselling and psychological support.

Logistic issues

Several students highlighted the problems they faced because they were not accustomed to the food available. Due to the lack of suitable meals, one student became so distressed that she felt she was constantly unwell.

A few students reported experiencing transportation-related problems during the first few months after arriving in the country. At the time, they did not have access to Uber, a transportation service. The students' only option was to rent a cab, which they discovered to be quite costly. Concerns regarding accommodations were shared by a few students. Not adapting to life in student lodgings was sometimes a problem. As one student explained, living in rental housing without anyone helping with its management.

Discussion

Globally, the number of international students has increased significantly. This is a predictable outcome of the substantial financial contributions that international students make to governments and institutions of higher learning. However, not all possible angles have been thoroughly examined, despite the stress and difficulties these students encounter in a foreign setting. To the best of our knowledge, the difficulties faced by foreign medical students in Pakistan have not been examined previously.

Students from various Pakistani institutions located in several cities throughout the nation participated in semi-structured interviews for this study. Their backgrounds varied, with origins in the US, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Thematic analysis was used to manually analyse the data. Five categories were identified from the results, and each was elaborated into further themes.

Our results show that even before they could begin the process of acculturation and assimilation to adjust to the new environment, the study participants experienced cultural shock. This is consistent with the Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, which served as the study's theoretical foundation.⁸

They found feeling judged and excluded challenging to cope with. According to several participants, they were never able to form a bond with their fellow students and eventually felt more at ease with students from similar backgrounds. This aligns with the results of a study conducted in the United States by Zhao et al., which revealed that students favour forming friendships with peers from similar backgrounds.⁹ According to Akanwa, international students find support and strength from others who are similar to them. He explains that this serves as a survival strategy for them.¹⁰ A UK study revealed that while they maintained close ties with students from similar cultural backgrounds, they also formed strong global relationships when forced to collaborate in a group setting.¹¹ Yet a study that examined the encounter of two very different cultures revealed that a close bond can form and even be maintained both on and off campus, even though the two study participants were inherently part of the same group. However, numerous factors contributed to the development of this bond.⁴ According to an Australian study, the reasons differed from our study in that overseas students struggling to adjust were primarily related to language difficulties, a heavy workload, and communication skills. However, similar to our study, this study also revealed that prejudice and cultural differences were contributing issues.¹²

Rather than having an impact on their academic performance, this study revealed that students believed their language barriers hindered their ability to communicate with others and become more at ease in their surroundings. Most research indicates that language obstacles negatively impact the academic performance of overseas students. A study conducted in 2011 in the United States revealed that international students struggled to grasp lectures, communicate, and make themselves understood.¹³ According to Robertson et al., language barriers cause many unresolved challenges for overseas students.¹⁴ Similarly, Andrade found in an assessment of international students attending English-speaking universities that foreign students need language proficiency to interact and communicate effectively.¹⁵ Duff et al. have proposed methods for students to improve their language proficiency, such as informal practice with bilingual friends or free language courses offered by certain colleges.¹⁶

The problem of students having trouble learning English as a foreign language has been addressed by an Australian university that requires all students to take an exam.¹⁷ Students who receive lower-than-average scores are then

subjected to a series of more rigorous tests. Students who have been identified as having poor English are then given small-group instruction to address their individual areas of difficulty.

According to the results of this study, two participants felt that they were unable to handle the stress and had to turn to healthcare professionals to receive psychiatric support, counselling, and medication, which is consistent with earlier research where, unfortunately, students believed that the assistance they required was not accessible.¹⁸ Student affairs staff may believe that international students are well-adjusted, which could explain this.¹⁵ When students are left to rely on passive, emotion-focused coping mechanisms, their thoughts become increasingly pessimistic, and their depressive symptoms worsen.¹⁹

The results of this study confirmed earlier research that students' expectations before coming to the country frequently did not align with their actual experiences.²⁰

Throughout the interviews, loneliness and solitude were frequent topics. The results of a study conducted among international students in Australia are comparable to those of this study. The study found that students from the same culture tended to form stronger networks among themselves and that 65% of students who reported feeling lonely and isolated had difficulty making friends from different cultures, compared to 36% of students who did not experience loneliness.²¹ The prevalence of loneliness and difficulties forming cross-cultural relationships were found to be related. According to a survey conducted in the UK, students there also experience a sense of alienation from domestic students.²² Participants in that study made sincere efforts to remove cultural challenges to integration, but were only partially successful.

Food, transportation, and housing issues were among the additional issues that some students in this survey reported having to cope with. In her research on "food insecurity" among international students in Ontario, Stewin discovered that a large number of students reported having food insecurity, which is the temporary or permanent inability to get wholesome, palatable foods that make life possible.²³

During the early stages of their arrival, transportation was a common problem for the participants in this study. The literature has documented transportation-related issues, each specific to the infrastructure of that nation. A UK study highlighted students' concerns about the unreliable public transit system and their inability to obtain a driver's licence.²⁴ One participant in an Australian study described the inconvenience he experienced because he was unfamiliar with public transportation.²⁰ In this study, accommodation problems arose from students' grievances about having to adjust to living in dorms with other students and how it affected their ability to sleep and use the restroom. According to a New Zealand study that included both secondary school and college students, 23% of students reported having trouble using public transport.²⁵

The stress and difficulties that overseas medical students encounter while studying in Pakistan have been examined, and as a result, strategies for improvement for future generations of students may be developed. Instead of dealing with issues after they have occurred, why not take care of them before they become serious? In our view, students should have access to information packs before they arrive, which may contain suggestions for where to dine, buy groceries, and other travel-related topics. In addition, incoming first-year students should be given access to student support groups. A student organisation for international students would also be beneficial, as it would allow them to meet seniors who could provide them with the support and direction they need to adjust. The importance of providing students with year-round psychological counselling and support, and ensuring they are aware of these resources, cannot be overstated. Mentoring programs must also be established to address ongoing problems informally. Incorporating intercultural learning within the curriculum design objectives and creating activities that align with those goals would be beneficial. Furthermore, students will be motivated to acquire the abilities necessary for multicultural engagement and intercultural interaction if the goal is made apparent to them.²⁵

This study could have produced more valuable data by recording students' stories over a longer time span of four to six months or even by comparing a group of first-year students' experiences with those of a group of senior-year international students who were more adjusted to the system over time. In the future, research using a mixed technique could be conducted with a larger student sample.

Conclusions

The data revealed that the students encountered a wide range of difficulties. Some challenges occasionally persisted for months without being resolved, and some challenges even had major, long-lasting effects on the students' lives. The primary issues these students encountered were loneliness, isolation, and culture shock. This study emphasises the critical role of college administration in creating a strategy that will make these students' experiences easier. By including both students and teachers, the experience can be improved.

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Contributions:

JRJ - Conception, Design

RS WO - Acquisition, Analysis, Interpretation

JRJ - Drafting

RS WO - Critical Review

All authors approved the final version to be published & agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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