

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

<https://johepal.com>

Exploration of Coping Strategies among International Students Confronting Acculturation Challenges in Iranian Universities

Mahza Pakzad¹

Email: mahza.pakzad@gmail.com



<http://orcid.org/0009-0007-9089-5774>

Abbas Abbaspour²

Email: abbaspour@atu.ac.ir



<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7118-7912>

Hamid Rahimian³

Email: rahimian@atu.ac.ir



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2808-0618>

Ali Khorsandi Taskoh⁴

Email: ali.khorsandi@atu.ac.ir



<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1045-5562>

* *Department of Educational Administration & Planning, Faculty of Psychology & Education, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), IRAN*

Article Received
2023/07/16

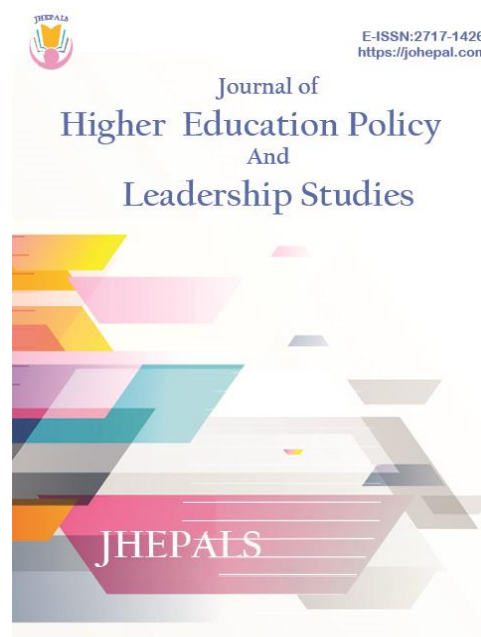
Article Accepted
2023/10/12

Published Online
2024/03/31

Cite article as:

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A. (2024). Exploration of coping strategies among international students confronting acculturation challenges in Iranian universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 5(1), 26-50.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.61186/johepal.5.1.26>



E-ISSN:2717-1426
<https://johepal.com>



Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS

Exploration of Coping Strategies among International Students Confronting Acculturation Challenges in Iranian Universities

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426

Volume: 5 Issue: 1

pp. 26-50

DOI:

10.61186/johepal.5.1.26

Abstract

Understanding acculturation process among international students, particularly coping strategies for acculturative stress, addressing educational migration challenges, and balancing intrapersonal and environmental factors during their stay in the host country, is critically important. This study sought to fill a research gap by exploring the coping strategies of international students residing in Iran concerning their acculturation process. The present exploratory qualitative research is grounded in the Husserlian phenomenological approach, with 40 international students from prominent Iranian universities as participants, selected through snowball sampling technique. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews based on Sideman's three-stage interview process (2006), and the validity of the collected data was confirmed based on the evaluation criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). In order to analyze the data, the seven-step process of thematic analysis by Colaizzi (1978) was employed, aiming to extract significant statements and quotations from the interview texts. The research findings regarding the most significant coping strategies employed by these students in their acculturation process include self-direction, networking, personal development, cross-cultural interaction, and social support. Recommendations from this research will benefit Iranian policymakers, higher education experts, university administrators, and relevant stakeholders in enhancing cross-cultural counseling services, offering support, and implementing international university programs effectively.

Mahza Pakzad
Abbas Abbaspour*
Hamid Rahimian
Ali Khorsandi Taskoh

Keywords: Acculturation; Copying Strategies; International Students; Higher Education Policies; Internationalization of HE

*Corresponding author's email: abbaspour@atu.ac.ir

Introduction

Today, across the world, the mutual influence of cultures on a global scale and the increasing trend of international student migration (Sharif, 2019), as well as the expansion of cross-cultural interactions among native and international students within international university environments, are noticeably evident (Di Pietro, 2022). Indeed, encountering other cultures leads to acquiring experience and knowledge that may not be attainable within one's own homeland (Khodaverdi, 2012). Consequently, studying abroad provides international students with a rich academic and intercultural experience, known as academic learning experience, which solely occurs outside their homeland (Duke, 2014), impacting students' cultural awareness and enhancing intercultural skills (Papatsiba, 2005). In this regard, Bostrom (2010) considers the internationalization of higher education as a combination of global and intercultural aspects in performance, programs, and objectives of higher education, emphasizing respect for cultural differences and diverse traditions, which, according to Huber (2002), universities can better, fulfill their role in the new millennium through the development of intercultural knowledge and cultural values.

In this context, one can refer to the perception of cultural diplomacy as a form of educational strategy that, through the gateway of culture and education, engages in the establishment and expansion of relationships with international students; a process through which a nation's culture is disseminated to the world through scholarly exchanges (Dehshiri & Taheri, 2016; Zaker Salehi & Salehi Najafabadi, 2012). This is why "the attraction of international students serves as an introduction to one's culture and society to the future political leaders and senior managers of world countries" as most political elites have always been university graduates (Khodaverdi, 2012, p. 138). Thus, according to Knight (2004), the approach of internationalization at home is one of the internationalization strategies at the university level, which demonstrates culturalization and the creation of a specific environment within the university in a manner that fosters increased intercultural understanding. Based on this, connecting with the host nationality provides opportunities for international students to learn about culture and acquire specific cultural skills, which are considered valuable economic assets for universities (Bevis, 2002), and it seeks measures and facilities to attract support from members of the host community (Ataca & Berry, 2002).

Nevertheless, while studying abroad is considered an opportunity for the personal growth and advancement of international students (Aldawsari et al., 2018), if these students fail to adapt to the requirements of their new environment or are unable to cope effectively with this situation (Desa et al., 2012), their mental health may be disrupted (Jackson et al., 2013). They may experience acculturative stress [i.e., stress resulting from life changes in the acculturation process (Berry, 2006)] and encounter problems and difficulties related to cultural-social adaptation, which can lead to outcomes such as depression, anxiety, physical ailments, stress, and feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Sam & Berry, 2010).

Considering the research by Nguyen and Benet-Martinez (as cited in Galdan, 2019), the encounter with different cultures and the quest for a kind of balance and harmony resulting from the stress caused by migration to another country and studying in an unfamiliar environment, commonly known as the acculturation process, encompasses the

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

psychological, social, and cultural challenges an individual faces in a different culture while assimilating the values and lifestyle of that dominant culture (Sam & Berry, 2016). This indicates that international students encounter challenges of acculturation and adaptation in three main domains: academic performance, social interactions in the new environment, and emotional interactions (Gebhard, 2012). These adaptations sometimes occur easily through processes of cultural accommodation (tolerance of cultural values) and learnable cultural behaviors. However, on the other hand, they can also lead to cultural conflicts and acculturative stress during intercultural interactions (Berry, 2005). This has led to the challenges of acculturation among these students receiving attention from international education leaders (Bu, 2019). Indeed, these challenges stem from linguistic barriers, distance from family, academic pressures, unfamiliarity with available resources and facilities, and also cultural values, conflicts, and prevalent racism and ethnocentrism, as well as a lack of sufficient knowledge to access supportive resources (Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Kim, 2012; Campbell, 2015; Galdan, 2019).

Therefore, identifying such changes necessitates sampling from the target population and studying individuals who are somehow involved in the acculturation process, as these changes encompass a spectrum of behavioral alterations, ranging from simple behavioral changes (such as speaking manner, dressing, and eating habits) to more significant and problematic ones, leading to acculturative stress and ultimately eliciting reactions in individuals, especially if appropriate strategies to cope with this type of stress and necessary social support are lacking (Sam & Berry, 2010). In this regard, it is important to mention that various researchers have classified migrant groups based on their length of stay in the host society in order to analyze the consequences of intercultural interaction (Zlobina et al., 2006). They have presented the short-term versus long-term classification as a means of predicting outcomes and the nature of interaction with the host community as one of the fundamental dimensions of intercultural relationships (Bochner, 1982). International students have been described by Bochner et al. (2006) as "Student Sojourners," individuals who travel abroad for a limited period of time to achieve a predetermined educational goal (Rahman, 2018). Therefore, students, who mostly have temporary residency compared to permanent immigrants and refugees, strive to attain their educational goals while seeking temporary solutions and strategies for their acculturation (Rahman, 2018). Conversely, higher education institutions are primarily interested in how international students acculturate and adapt, as well as assessing support measures prior to the students' departure for international programs (Beaven, 2012).

Although academic and social interest in the consequences of this growing phenomenon has led to numerous studies in recent decades (Ninnes, 1999; Williams, 2005; Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Campbell, 2015; Mao & Liu, 2016; Pogorelova, 2016; Vulić-Prtorić & Oetjen, 2017; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Rahman, 2018; Xu, 2019; Bu, 2019; Boateng, 2020; Lopez, 2021; Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022; Ra, 2023; Lashari et al., 2023); generally, the individual experiences of international students and their coping strategies, especially in terms of influential institutional and personal factors, have rarely been investigated in detail, particularly from the perspective of longitudinal research (Beaven, 2012; Galdan, 2019; Alghamdi, 2019; Pogorelova & Trenchs, 2018). It is noteworthy that most of these studies have also focused on newly arrived students in universities in the

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

United States and other developed countries (Flournoy, 2018; Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Garza, 2015; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Gbadamosi, 2018), while the proportion of studies in Asian countries has been insufficient (Rahman, 2018; Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2014).

However, thousands of students are still engaged in academic pursuits across various Asian countries, including Iran. What's intriguing is the recent surge in unexpected student migrations within Asia. Unlike before, these students are now seeking educational opportunities within their own regional context, sparking significant shifts in the global higher education landscape (Pawar et al., 2020). In fact, Asia, being the primary source region for international students worldwide, witnesses a shift in intellectual horizons and a distinct trend in student migration within the region (Chan, 2012). This necessitates an understanding of the needs, problems, and challenges of international students, particularly those from Asia, to aid initiatives aimed at their cultural adaptation and integration into the host society, facilitating their educational objectives. It is imperative that policymakers and decision-makers in the higher education sector prioritize these considerations (Chan, 2012). Given that higher education institutions still fall short in meeting the specific needs of international students and providing supportive services to facilitate their acculturation process (Rabia, 2015, as cited in Galdan, 2019).

According to Gbadamosi (2018), valuable research efforts are perceived as those that identify the responses and reactions of international students to the host cultural environment academically, socially, and culturally within the educational sector. As observed, a wide spectrum of studies and research endeavors, as mentioned above, has been conducted aimed at analyzing various dimensions of acculturation experiences, social adaptation, intercultural adjustment, and coping strategies of international students in developed countries. However, unfortunately, significant research in this area has not been undertaken in developing countries such as Iran. Given the novelty and emerging nature of this subject within the realm of higher education management and the absence of specialized, comprehensive analyses in Iran, conducting research in this area becomes essential for illuminating its obscure and unexplored facets.

Therefore, this phenomenological study aimed to fill the existing research gap by examining coping strategies of international students residing in Iran regarding their acculturation process. By providing insights to stakeholders, decision-makers, higher education experts, and the academic community of Iran; the present study sought to create conditions conducive to the development of multicultural perspectives. Alongside setting up efficient communication channels and providing ongoing support and counseling throughout the international students' stay, this research also sought to fully engage these students in the vibrant cultural tapestry of Iran, rooted in its rich and storied heritage. Certainly, policymakers in higher education, as well as managers and counselors in the international department of Iranian universities, benefit extensively from the results of the forthcoming research in formulating and directing specific supportive strategies and policies in this area. Accordingly, the main research question of the present study is as follows:

- What are the coping strategies employed by international students residing in Iran in their acculturation process, based on the analysis of their lived experiences?

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

Acculturation

The systematic and scholarly study of acculturation dates back to the early 20th century, commencing with the research of individuals such as Park (1928), Yieh (1934), and Stonequist (1935). The classical definition of acculturation, as provided by Redfield, Lipton, and Herskovits (1936), is as follows: "Acculturation is a phenomenon resulting from the interaction of groups of individuals from different cultures who engage in direct and continuous social interaction with each other, and this interaction is accompanied by subsequent changes in the primary patterns of one or both cultural groups" (149).

Sam and Berry (2010) contend that acculturation is "the process of cultural and psychological changes that occur as a result of cultural contact and interaction between cultures" (p. 472). In fact, it represents a dual process of cultural or psychological change that takes place in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of an individual as a consequence of contact and interaction between two or more culturally diverse groups or individuals (Berry, 2005 & 2017; Gibson, 2001; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). In this regard, Schwartz et al. (2010) also assert that acculturation does not mean replacing the dominant culture with the original culture of the immigrant. As per the statements of Sam and Berry (2010), individuals experience affective change (stress, tension, well-being, satisfaction), behavioral change (cultural learning), cognitive change (social identity), and developmental change (cultural identity, personal growth, and family relationships) during the acculturation process.

Berry (1997) introduced four "acculturation strategies: Assimilation, Separation, Integration, and Marginalization" (p. 9) to provide a framework for aiding individuals and groups in a multicultural society. These strategies enable individuals to identify their acculturation methods in either dominant or minority cultural groups. According to Ward (2008, p. 196), such strategies can be briefly described as:

- **Assimilation:** Individuals may abandon their culture of origin and prioritize the culture of the receiving country.
- **Separation:** Individuals may have little interest with the new culture and may resort to retaining the culture of origin.
- **Integration:** Immigrants maintain their culture of origin and adopt their culture of destination at the same time.
- **Marginalization:** Individuals neither maintain their cultural identity nor build relationships with those of the receiving country.

Acculturative Stress

Berry (1997) posits that acculturative stress is "a reactive tension response to life events rooted in the acculturation experience" (p. 19). In his comprehensive definition of acculturative stress, he further elaborates that "it is a type of stress in which the sources of stressors become evident in the acculturation process, characterized by a specific set of tension-related behaviors that manifest during acculturation, such as disruptions in mental health status [especially distress, anxiety, and depression], isolationism, and feelings of alienation, increased psychosomatic symptoms, and a sense of identity loss" (Berry, 1995, p. 479). While these symptoms of anxiety and distress may resemble other stress-related reactions and common concerns or worries, in reality, acculturative stress has been identified as a type of stress resulting from migration and the experience of life in a new

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

culture. This stress encompasses physical symptoms, depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

It is important to recognize that although the symptoms of anxiety and distress in acculturation stress may share similarities with other stress-related reactions and common concerns, it is indeed a distinct form of stress that emerges from the process of migration and living in a new cultural environment. This unique form of stress is characterized by physical manifestations, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and a decline in self-esteem (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In this regard, Organista et al. (2010) pointed out that acculturative stress emerges when individuals encounter difficulties and challenges stemming from changes in unfamiliar and intangible social and psychological conditions (Galdan, 2019).

For instance, Chen et al. (2008) found that acculturative stress results from psychological pressure, conflicts, and common disparities between an individual's original culture and the new culture. It is also influenced by the process of learning a new language, as well as a new set of social interactions and dialogues, norms, and cultural values. In this context, prior research suggested that certain acculturative stress factors, such as discrimination and psychological pressure in the realms of intercultural and linguistic relations, serve as predictors of cultural differences, influencing individuals' psychological well-being and mental health (Galdan, 2019). Hence, acculturative stress is considered a significant factor in the realm of international students, garnering substantial attention from many researchers (Constantine et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

In fact, international students, in addition to grappling with all the challenges and changes that their native classmates also encounter at the university, such as time management skills or academic responsibility and personal growth and development, face a wide range of potential new challenges, including: difficulty in grasping academic lectures, struggling to communicate effectively in class and express questions, facing obstacles in completing oral and written assignments and exams, and experiencing difficulties in forming friendships and engaging with others, all stemming from a lack of language proficiency. Educational stressors may arise from being unfamiliar with the university system, adapting to a new educational and socio-cultural environment, and facing a disconnect between their expectations and the realities of university life. Acculturation to a new culture presents additional hurdles, including the loss of close relationships with family and friends from one's home country. Interactions within the host community may further compound feelings of isolation and disconnection. Additionally, international students may feel pressure to embody the role of a "cultural ambassador" perpetuating a sense of obligation to represent their culture while adapting to a new environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Misra et al., 2003; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Rasmi et al., 2009; Townsend & Poh, 2008).

Furthermore, international students may face financial difficulties, high university tuition fees, and limited job opportunities (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). This could potentially pressure them, as they are often reliant on financial support from both their families and their home country's universities. Consequently, they may feel compelled to demonstrate a high level of academic performance. Failure to meet these expectations could exacerbate the acculturative stress experienced by these students (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000).

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

Additionally, studies such as Khawaja and Dempsey (2008), Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), and Hanassab (2006) have highlighted other stress-inducing factors, including discrimination, international students' dissatisfaction with receiving less social support compared to native students, the emergence of feelings of inferiority due to direct verbal insults, as well as the presence of unpleasant feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002).

Therefore, as clarified, the approach of international students towards adapting to a new culture differs from that of immigrants (Rahman, 2018), and it is reasonable to expect that an international student, due to being in a new cultural environment, faces a wide range of life changes and transformations, which can turn into stressors and, so to speak, challenges and dilemmas for them. However, it should not be overlooked that the impact of acculturative stressors varies depending on the assessment and coping strategies of each international student, their attitude towards the host culture, as well as the role of social support from the host community in their cultural experience (Pitts, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Research Methodology

The chosen approach for conducting this exploratory research is qualitative, as it provides researchers with the opportunity to "gain initial insights into less-studied topics or phenomena" (Leedy, 1989, p. 253). Husserlian phenomenology, as a selected research method in the present study, allows the researcher to delve into exploration and inquiry regarding the understanding, perspective, cognition, and feelings of individuals who have experienced or lived the phenomenon or situation under investigation. This can be particularly valuable for groups such as therapists, educators, healthcare providers, and policymakers (Creswell, 2007).

Accordingly, the present qualitative research strategy, aligned with the research objective, follows Colaizzi's seven-step analytical approach (Colaizzi, 1978), which relies on describing participants' experiences and includes the following stages: the transcription of recorded interview texts (transcribing interview texts and note-taking during interviews), identification of meaningful phrases (careful reading of interview texts and highlighting significant statements, sentences, and phrases), formulation of meaningful phrases or statements (deriving concepts from categories and clusters derived from meaningful statements), clustering of formulated meanings, and then creating themes from these clusters (generating themes that encompass concepts), detailed description of the phenomenon in narrative form, shaping the themes through reducing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (writing a descriptive account of the text and content influencing the formation of participants' experiences, and synthesizing and integrating descriptions to emerge the essence of the phenomenon), and validation of descriptions and participants' experiences.

The concept of "Epoche" in the Husserlian method is the first and highly significant step (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). It is the foremost conceptual element that necessitates special attention in the phenomenological research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 85). In other words, it entails "suspending any preconceptions or personal experiences that might unduly influence the researchers' perceptions" (Leedy, 1989, p. 256).

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

The most crucial practical steps of the Epoche process in the current research, during the stages of data collection, data analysis, and research validity, are as follows:

- Suspending preconceptions, judgments, attitudes, beliefs, and the knowledge possessed by the researchers at the outset of the study.
- Comprehensive documentation and recording of the collected data during interviews, ensuring their accessibility, scrutiny, and potential reexamination.
- Researchers' note-taking and annotation during the interviews, as well as throughout the data analysis phase (reflective notes).
- Involvement of participants in the research during the data analysis stages.
- Benefiting from the collaboration of a second coder, an expert researcher, in the role of the secondary coder in the research process.

In accordance with the study's aims and the logic expounded, the research utilizes purposive sampling, specifically employing a snowball sampling technique. This method empowers the researcher to identify "individuals rich in knowledge and experience" who meet the primary interview participation criteria by requesting introductions from individuals who have previously engaged in research interviews. This sampling technique enables the inclusion of participants who can offer valuable insights and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, enhancing the overall richness of the data (Patton, 2002, p. 298). For each participant in this study, a "Research Participation Invitation" was provided. These invitations encompassed detailed explanations and information regarding the research, including its objectives, a brief description of the interview process, participation requirements, participants' right to withdraw from the interview without any penalty, the researchers' responsibilities in maintaining the confidentiality of their information, as well as the potential consequences, benefits, and risks associated with participation in the study. Furthermore, full consent of participants was obtained in both written and oral forms (ICF "Informed Consent Form for Participation in Interview-Based Studies" and "Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research Projects") following a thorough explanation of the research protocol, including data collection, interpretation, and presentation methods. This approach aligns with the perspective of Cox-White and Zimbelman (1998) who argue that informed consent empowers participants to make decisions based on their personal interests.

The selected participants of this research consisted of 40 international students aged between 21 and 42 years (19 males and 21 females), enrolled in undergraduate (12 individuals), master's (14 individuals), and doctoral (14 individuals) programs at universities including (University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, University of Qom, Imam Khomeini International University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Kurdistan, Urmia University, Iran University of Medical Sciences, University of Guilan, Alzahra University, and Tehran University of Medical Sciences). These students migrated to Iran from various countries including France, Russia, India, Italy, Indonesia, Hungary, Afghanistan, Germany, Tanzania, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, China, Armenia, and Iraqi Kurdistan to pursue their studies. They were continuing their studies in various academic fields under the umbrella of Humanities (Management, Linguistic, Persian Literature, Iranology, International Relations,

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

etc.), Medical Sciences (Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, etc.), and Engineering Sciences (Civil Engineering, Computer Science, etc.). Their duration of study ranged from one and a half years to approximately six years.

The data collection instrument employed in this research was interviews (semi-structured in nature) aimed at eliciting the interviewees' narratives. Interviews, compared to other instruments, provide a faster data collection platform, facilitating more detailed exploration of issues from research participants and immediate clarification, thereby enabling researchers to gather important data inaccessible through mere observation or quantitative data analysis (Leedy, 1989; Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Thus, interviews enable the researcher to discern "meaningful cues in participants' expressions, pauses, questions, and sometimes tangential remarks" (Leedy, 1989, p. 256).

The interview questions used in this research designed by the researchers, preceded by a pilot study examining the interview protocol draft in both Persian and English languages with two volunteer participants (one male and one female international student) who possessed a good understanding of the phenomenon under study and were proficient in both aforementioned languages; however, they were not part of the final research sample. Both pilot interviews were audio-recorded. Subsequently, researchers paid attention to the responses and feedback from these two volunteers to refine the interview questions in terms of conceptual clarity, sentence structure, and interview timing, ensuring clarity at each stage of the questions and making necessary adjustments. This was carried out in line with improving the interview process and ensuring the credibility and transparency of interview questions (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, the final interview protocol was provided in both Persian and English languages based on the preference and proficiency level of the interviewees in the aforementioned languages, available to the researchers.

On the one hand, it is crucial to note that qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis (Van Manen, 1990). Considering that the study revolves around exploring the experiences of international students' acculturation, which necessitates an inquiry into their experiences, perspectives, and opinions through interactive engagements, researchers, in addition to conducting interviews and field notes, presented reports derived from the interviews to reflect the research process. It is worth mentioning that researchers, in pursuit of data collection through interviews, implemented the three-stage interview process outlined by Seidman (2006), which comprises important and fundamental phenomenological principles as follows:

1. The first phase: Focusing on the life history (laying the groundwork for interviewee experiences).
2. The second phase: Elaborating on the experiential details (emphasizing the concrete particulars of interviewee experiences).
3. The third phase: Reflecting on meaning (eliciting the meaning of the experience from the interviewees).

By following this structured approach, the researchers aimed to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. In total, 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews (conducted in either Persian or English, depending on the interviewee's preference) were carried out face-to-face at selected

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

locations convenient for the participants, ranging from 40 to 180 minutes each. It is noteworthy that to capture the interview texts, all conversations were recorded with permission, using an MP3 player, to facilitate data access for analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, meaning that all recorded utterances by both the interviewee and the interviewer, including every word and sentence, as well as emotional reactions such as silence, pauses, laughter, sobbing, and crying, were meticulously transcribed. Accurate translations of the interviews were provided by the researchers of the present study. In order to maintain the credibility of the translations and prevent any personal bias, two English language experts were also requested to review the interview transcripts and their translations. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times by the researchers, and all peripheral conversations (tangential discussions) or unrelated interactions were removed from the original interview texts. The final interview texts were then prepared for data analysis using the detailed thematic analysis method.

In order to preserve the participants' privacy and confidentiality of their information, codes were used instead of their real names during recording and reporting of the results and findings. Participants were informed that the audio files and written transcripts of the interviews (in Word or PDF format) would be securely stored on the research team's laptop and on a password-protected USB drive, exclusively accessible to the researchers. This access control measure will remain in place until the official publication of the research results in a reputable journal, ensuring the preservation and confidentiality of the data. The fundamental concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research involves attention to its validity and reliability (Cypress, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Colaizzi (1978) posits the final validity, grounded in the engagement with participants in the concluding phase and obtaining their confirmation regarding the comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. In this research, participant engagement is regarded as research collaborators, contributing to the review and verification of interview transcripts and obtaining their confirmations on the presented comprehensive descriptions of their statements.

Results and Discussion

Therefore, as revealed, the approach of international students towards the concept of acculturation and adaptation to a new culture differs from that of immigrants (Rahman, 2018). It is reasonable to anticipate that an international student, by virtue of being situated in a novel cultural environment, would encounter a wide spectrum of life changes and transformations. As previously mentioned, these changes have become sources of acculturation-related stress and, colloquially speaking, challenges and predicaments for international students residing in Iran. The only recourse for them is to employ coping strategies as a natural response to the stresses of acculturation (Park et al., 2017). These strategies include self-direction, networking, personal development, cross-cultural interaction, and social support, as acculturation and adaptation necessitate the acquisition of essential skills in intercultural communication and ultimately the manifestation of a sense of cultural unity or diversity (Pogorelova & Trenchs, 2018).

Although it should not be overlooked that the impact of acculturation-related stressors varies depending on the assessment and the approach of each international

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

student and their attitude toward the host culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In fact, all participants in this study acknowledged that, in order to facilitate their acculturation process and to counter the stressors associated with acculturation, they employ their own specific strategies, tactics and coping mechanisms when facing these challenges, thereby delineating which approach was more beneficial for them. It is worth noting that they put forth greater efforts in the domains of self-direction, learning, personal growth, and development, which is in line with Chirkov's (2009) findings.

Self-direction encompasses a diverse spectrum of strategies aimed at enhancing these students' ability to cope with stressful situations, unforeseen changes, and their initial adaptation to events occurring throughout their acculturation process. In reality, international students, when confronted with the challenges of their acculturation in Iranian society, strive to employ resilience skills, stress management in the face of adverse events, foster a positive mindset as a desirable mental attribute, and exhibit the ability to transform automatic negative thoughts into positive ones. By doing so, they aim to enhance their self-confidence and belief in their capabilities in the pursuit of their goals.

Self-care activities such as engaging in physical exercises, ensuring sufficient sleep hours, and consumption of nutritious food, along with the utilization of relaxation techniques, were employed by these students as practices for the maintenance of both physical and mental well-being. This approach served to mitigate stress and enhance their overall resilience in facing challenges and difficulties. For instance, concerning the resilience skill, defined as the ability to confront stress-inducing situations and unforeseen changes, participant 29, while acknowledging the stress stemming from academic issues alongside other social responsibilities such as her role as a spouse and a mother, endeavored to endure and cope with the specific life conditions in her current situation in pursuit of her aspirations. She stated

I leave home at 6 in the morning every day, and I return home no later than 9 at night because, in addition to university classes, I am obliged to attend English and Persian language classes. Essentially, I have no time for studying due to the university's inadequate scheduling. When I return home at 9 at night, I have to tend to my children and husband. Because our scholarship amount is meager, we only have a gas stove, a refrigerator, and a rug. We live with minimal amenities, much like the impoverished, so that I can bear the burden of my studies and, in the future, build a better life for myself, my children, and my husband. (Participant #29)

Participant 6, in reference to harassment and sexual advances by some Iranian men within society, highlights her momentary coping strategies for extricating herself from these unpleasant situations. She mentions actions such as taking a picture of the harasser and pretending not to be fluent in Persian, along with quickly leaving the scene when faced with such unforeseen events in an Islamic country. She stated

There was a man who was over 50 years old. He said, 'You are very pretty. Can you come to my flat? You will have a great time with me there.' I was so frightened that I just ran and fled out of sheer terror. (Participant #6)

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

Regarding the recurring power outages during the end-of-term online examinations at the university, Participant 40 emphasized the importance of maintaining composure and swift response in answering exam questions. He stated

With composure and stress control, we wrote all the questions we knew and quickly uploaded them to prevent the dormitory's power and internet from being cut off. Otherwise, all our efforts in studying for the entire course could be wasted, as no one, not even the professors, could offer any assistance. It was truly challenging days. (Participant #40)

Networking, the establishment of a friendly network for international students residing in Iran to benefit from guidance and support, was of paramount importance. Consequently, these international students, apart from maintaining their pre-existing relationships after leaving their friends, family, and homeland, engaged in the creation of a social network of new friends and acquaintances in a novel environment. Connecting with individuals who share a common cultural background, forming academic communication groups (interactions with professors, university staff, and academic advisors or counselors), joining student organizations or associations, establishing close ties with local communities, and fostering positive relationships with peers and neighbors cultivated a sense of belonging and emotional attachment in these students. In fact, it was the development of such relationships that instilled qualities like resilience, consideration, and camaraderie in these students, all of which are significant components of adapting to a new environment (Garcia et al., 2014). It is worth noting that international students who experienced substantial friend-based support exhibited fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Such support aided them in better adapting to cultural differences, enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills and competence. This finding aligns with previous research (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Pan et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2013; Montgomery, 2010; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gill, 2007).

Participant 38, referring to the difficulty in understanding the Iranian currency and the challenges posed by the transition from Rial to Toman during the initial days of his stay in Iran, mentioned the guidance he received from his Iranian friends. They imparted a valuable solution to him, enabling a better grasp of the local currency:

Understanding the Iranian currency was quite challenging, and I couldn't make head or tail of the Iranian money. My Iranian friends advised me to remove four of its zeroes so I could comprehend it better. They practiced with me to teach me how to deal with this currency. (Participant #38)

Personal development was another strategy employed by international students to enhance their individual skills in dealing with acculturation challenges. This copying strategy has had a significant impact on their academic performance and self-confidence. International students residing in Iran have taken steps to reduce their social isolation by increasing their self-awareness through self-study and language skill acquisition. In reality, self-directed learning is regarded as a modern learning style and problem-solving skill that enables individuals to enhance their capacity to identify obstacles, find solutions, and evaluate the most appropriate problem-solving approaches. Consequently, self-directed learning is an effective method for acquiring knowledge and awareness in a short period,

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

facilitated by the ease of accessing a wide range of websites and social networks in this digital age.

One of these issues was the development of language skills, with a lack of proficiency in this area being among the main contributors to acculturation-related stress experienced by international students in Iran. Chen (1999) maintains that anxiety stemming from a lack of proficiency in a second language is a stress-inducing factor directly associated with other stressors in both academic and socio-cultural domains. In the academic domain, a lack of language proficiency was found to impact the completion of coursework and class projects and assignments, comprehension of professors' instruction and academic lectures, success in both oral and written exams, as well as the ability to ask questions and participate in class discussions. On the social front, this language barrier was seen as a hindrance to international students' efforts to establish friendships and engage with the local people in the host community. This issue has been acknowledged in studies by Chen (1999) and Mori (2000). Hence, international students sought to enhance their language skills by participating in language courses, engaging in language exchange programs on social networks such as YouTube, Instagram, and the like, and also by interacting with local individuals. Furthermore, to align themselves with the Iranian calendar, they utilized practical date conversion applications.

For instance, participant 12, expressing unfamiliarity with the solar calendar, stated:
I still find it difficult to work with the solar calendar. I have installed an application on my mobile phone that converts the date because I'm not very familiar with this date conversion, and this is how I solve my problem.
(Participant #12)

Some other students, like participant 5, mentioned using social networks for better self-learning of the Persian language and gaining familiarity with Persian poetry, culture, and literature:

I use many of these social networks for learning the Persian language, such as Instagram pages dedicated to Persian poets and poetry, or listening to speeches by various figures like Abdolkarim Soroush or Dr. Elahi Ghomshei. (Participant #5)

Cultural interaction undoubtedly reveals cultural differences upon initial entry and acquaintance with a new environment. This includes encountering various challenges and cultural shocks, which result from the diverse customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and social norms present in the new society. These cultural challenges, often associated with anxiety stemming from a lack of understanding of the emerging cultural phenomena, pose a significant impact on international students. During the process of acculturation, international students residing in Iran have endeavored to meet their daily needs while striving to adapt to the new culture. Concurrently, they familiarized themselves with the social values of Iranian society, aiming to achieve cultural adjustment.

In this regard, they, in order to align with the new cultural expectations, while challenging their cultural stereotypes and understanding cultural differences, engaged in interacting with the multicultural or multi-ethnic environment of Iran. This involvement

encompassed active participation in cultural exchange activities, cultural events, festivals, and local community interactions, as well as learning intercultural communication. This allowed them to liberate themselves from feelings of isolation, frustration, and nostalgia, enabling them to exhibit a more effective performance, which corresponds with the findings of Gu et al. (2010). It is crucial to note that adaptation to a new culture is a time-consuming process. Throughout the acculturation process, individuals gain a mutual understanding of the unique cultural features of their own culture and the new culture they are embracing (Berry, 2017). Hence, it was crucial for international students to establish realistic expectations and approach the acculturation process by enhancing their cross-cultural understanding and patiently embracing differences. It is worth noting that the attitudinal and behavioral changes experienced by the majority of participants in this study were linked to their inclination to preserve their original culture while concurrently achieving cultural and social compatibility with Iranian society.

In reference to their awareness of differences in greeting etiquette in Iran, particularly during initial encounters, one of the participants expressed the following guidance received from their Iranian professor:

I was told never to shake hands first with ladies. Because there, not everyone wants to shake hands, as some people are religious. And this might cause trouble for me. (Participant #34)

In an effort to enhance interactions with Iranians, another participant attempted to make use of common Iranian colloquialisms to better succeed in communicating with others:

Well, I've learned to say 'ja`nam' and 'azizam' from you Iranians. So, sometimes when my friend calls me, I respond by saying 'ja`nam.' When our professors call or address us as 'azizam,' we understand that they genuinely care about us, and we also hold them in high regard. (Participant #6)

Social support is another coping strategy for overcoming and is one of the influential factors on the adaptation and acculturation of international students in the host community (Chavoshi et al., 2017). It refers to the "nature of interactions that occur in social relationships, particularly how individuals assess the benefits of the support received" (Mak & Kim, 2011, p. 60). Indeed, social support consistently correlates with lower acculturative stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) and better socio-cultural adaptation of individuals (Boruah, 2016; Mao & Liu, 2016). It is recognized as a predictor of the importance of psychological adaptation in international students (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Expanding relationships and interactions with the people of Iran through various channels, benefiting from some institutional and academic support, joining existing student organizations or associations, receiving counseling services provided international students with opportunities to gain awareness of Iranian culture, norms, and the expectations of Iranian society. This, in turn, helped them to experience lower acculturative stress and academic concerns to the best extent possible, fostering a constructive and fruitful adaptation to the new environment, and ultimately avoiding negative psychological adaptation issues. The provision of guidance, support, and coping strategies tailored to the needs of these international students by the International affairs advisors for international

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

students at some of the universities studied in this research had a significant impact on enhancing their cultural and social familiarity. In general, the coping strategies mentioned earlier align with the findings of studies (Berry, 2006; Park, 2022; Bai, 2016; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Park et al., 2017), all aiming to reduce acculturative stress and foster the acculturation of international students.

For instance, participant 3, while discussing the ease of the Iranian police in handling his complaint against wrongdoers, referred to the support he received from one of his professors in resolving an issue that had arisen for him. He stated

Due to the fraud that occurred during the registration process of my phone, I went to the police to file a complaint. However, the extensive questioning and interrogation by the police made me withdraw my complaint. Nonetheless, one of my professors helped me in asserting my rights. (Participant #3)

One of the international students described receiving financial assistance from one of his Iranian friends during a period when he was experiencing financial difficulties:

I am on a scholarship, but I haven't received any money yet, and the authorities are not addressing this matter. However, my Iranian friend lent me money to help resolve my issues. (Participant #19)

Conclusion

This section provides a summary of the discussions regarding coping strategies employed by international students in Iranian universities. This section summarizes the discussions regarding coping strategies employed by working international students in Iranian universities, focusing on their experiences of acculturation and the shifts in their attitudes and behaviors resulting from interaction with the Iranian community. This group has remained, to this day, relatively underexplored and understudied. Indeed, these students' perception of their acculturation experiences is framed as a "new chapter" and a turning point in their lives. It can be described as an opportunity to understand a new and somewhat different world—a process akin to "shedding the outer skin," so to speak, which has been quite transformative for them.

Although each of the participants had embarked on a unique journey to pursue their education in Iran, the majority shared a common goal: to achieve academic excellence and carve out a brighter future for themselves. Along this path, they confronted unimaginable challenges and issues as they grappled with the new social environment, the life changes resulting from it, the distinct educational system, and the unique culture. Throughout their acculturation process, they had to apply psychological and socio-cultural adaptability strategies, and cope with the stressors associated with the daily life changes and cultural interactions. In their efforts to mitigate the stress-inducing factors of acculturation, each of these students employed various coping strategies to facilitate their cultural transition.

In order to address the stress-inducing factors related to acculturation, each of the participants in this study employed their own coping strategies. According to statements made by Park et al. (2017), these strategies significantly influenced their acculturation process and brought about notable changes in their attitudes and behaviors regarding cultural adaptation. Among the primary coping strategies employed by most participants in

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

this study, self-direction (Bai et al., 2023; Sokolova et al., 2022; Karipek, 2017; Campbell, 2015) and networking (Nadeem et al., 2022; Pang & Wang, 2020; Wilton & Constantine, 2003) were prominent. These strategies aided them in enhancing their cultural competence, reaffirming their existential value in Iranian culture, and concurrently, by initiating self-initiated social interactions and connections with various Iranian groups, they sought alternatives for the organizational support they had been deprived of.

Individuals' understanding of their own acculturation process and the strategies they employ to cope with acculturative stressors necessitate not only the individual efforts of international students but also require coordination and action across various levels of policymakers, planners, administrators, and implementers in Iranian higher education institutions. This is in line with the viewpoint of Wu et al. (2015) who believe that, in addition to the students' efforts to overcome the challenges and stresses of acculturation, university faculty and staff should be informed about such matters to provide social and cultural support to these students.

Based on the obtained results, it can be suggested that the conscientious efforts of Iranian university authorities in cultural awareness and sharing the life experiences of previous international students, organizing orientation courses to familiarize them with Iranian culture, and providing intercultural education before these students embark on their studies in the cultural centers of Iranian embassies and improving facilities and providing material and moral support can play a significant role in reducing acculturative stress among international students.

Furthermore, regardless of the symbolic presence of some international student associations in certain universities, there is an apparent lack of an active communicative or organizational body that can act as an intermediary between international students and the relevant university units and social sectors. The establishment of a specialized student body for international students, chosen selectively from eligible male and female foreign students, would enable these individuals to efficiently address issues and challenges, facilitating their quick resolution through easier interaction with the relevant university departments.

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

There is no financial support to be cited here.

Human Participants

The ethical considerations for human participants in this study strictly adhere to the guidelines outlined by the journal's policies. Confidentiality was of utmost importance, and participants' wishes to withdraw from the study were respected at all times. Prior consent was obtained from participants before recording interviews, and transcripts were provided upon request. Participants were made aware that all discussions were coded using false names to ensure anonymity. Moreover, this article, resulting from a doctoral dissertation, has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research at Allameh Tabataba'i University, with the ethical approval code IR.ATU.REC.1399.025.

Originality Note

The authors declare that this manuscript is entirely their own original work. Proper citation and quotation methods have been employed for any references to the works of others.

Authors' Note:

This article is derived from the Ph.D. dissertation in Higher Education Management supervised by Dr. Abbaspour at Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran.

JHEPALS Editorial Office Note:

As this manuscript is co-authored by the editors-in-chief, the following issues are considered:

- Two members of the editorial team were working on the manuscript (on behalf of editors-in-chief) in its initial editorial screening.
- Two other members of the editorial team (while the authors' identifying information was kept as anonymous) joined the team to pursue further review of the research.
- Potential reviewers were identified and they received the revised version based on the comments.
- Another round of review was administered to maximize the scientific merits of the research and avoid biased editorial decision-making.

References

- Ahmad, A. B., & Shah, M. (2018). International students' choice to study in China: An exploratory study. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 24(4), 325-337.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2018.1458247>
- Aldawsari, N. F., Adams, K. S., Grimes, L. E., & Kohn, S. (2018). The effects of cross-cultural competence and social support on international students' psychological adjustment: Autonomy and environmental mastery. *Journal of International Students*, 8(2), 901-924.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i2.120>
- Alghamdi, F. S. (2019). *Examining the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugee emerging adults in the United States of America* [Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University].
<https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/1754>
- Ataca, B., & Berry, J. W. (2002). Psychological, sociocultural, and marital adaptation of Turkish immigrant couples in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology*, 37(1), 13-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00207590143000135>
- Bai, B., Ge, Y., & Li, Z. (2023). Psychological study of international doctoral students studying in China: Cross-cultural adaptation. *Current Psychology*, 42(36), 32270-32283.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-04133-4>
- Bai, J. (2016). Perceived support as a predictor of acculturative stress among international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 93-106.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083271.pdf>
- Beaven, A. M. G. (2012). *An exploration of cross-cultural adaptation in the context of European student mobility* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Warwick].
<http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b2583342~S1>
- Behrnd, V., & Porzelt, S. (2012). Intercultural competence and training outcomes of students with experiences abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36(2), 213-223.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.04.005>
- Benet-Martinez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psychological antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, 73(4), 1015-1050.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x>
- Berry, J. W. (1995). Psychology of acculturation. In N. R. Goldberger & J. B. Veroff (Eds.), *The Culture and Psychology Reader* (pp. 457-488). New York University Press.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5-34.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697-712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Berry, J. W. (2006). Stress perspectives on acculturation. In D. L. Sam, & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* (pp. 43-57). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489891.007>
- Berry, J. W. (2017). Theories and models of acculturation. In S. J. Schwartz & J. B. Unger (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health* (pp. 15-28). Oxford University Press.
- Bevis, T. B. (2002). At a glance: International students in the United States. *International Educator*, 11(3), 12-17.
- Boafo-Arthur, S. (2014). Acculturative experiences of Black-African international students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 36(2), 115-124.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-013-9194-8>

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

- Boateng, D. D. K. (2020). *Exploring the lived experiences of Ghanaian immigrant students in college: A phenomenological study* (Publication No. 27957833) [Doctoral dissertation, Keiser University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2404055281?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>
- Bochner, S. (1982). The social psychology of cross-cultural relations. In S. Bochner (Ed.), *Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross-Cultural Interaction* (pp. 5-44). Pergamon. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-025805-8.50008-1>
- Boruah, A. (2016). A study on socio-cultural adaptation and psychological distress among international students using social support as a moderator. *International Journal of Education & Management Studies*, 6(2), 180-185.
- Bostrom, C. A. (2010). Diffusion of internationalization in Turkish higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(2), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309332028>
- Bu, Y. (2019). *The role of an international education program in facilitating international students' acculturation and self-efficacy* [Doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi]. <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.6/87841>
- Campbell, T. A. (2015). A phenomenological study on international doctoral students' acculturation experiences at a U.S. university. *Journal of International Students*, 5(3), 285-299. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i3.422>
- Chan, S. J. (2012). Shifting patterns of student mobility in Asia. *Higher Education Policy*, 25(2), 207-224. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2012.3>
- Chavoshi, S., Wintre, M. G., Dentakos, S., & Wright, L. (2017). A developmental sequence model to university adjustment of international undergraduate students. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 703-727. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.295>
- Chen, C. P. (1999). Professional issues: Common stressors among international college students: Research and counseling implications. *Journal of College Counseling*, 2(1), 49-65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.1999.tb00142.x>
- Chen, S. X., Benet-Martinez, V., & Bond, M. H. (2008). Bicultural identity, bilingualism, and psychological adjustment in multicultural societies: Immigration-based and globalization-based acculturation. *Journal of Personality*, 76(4), 803-838. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00505.x>
- Chirkov, V. (2009). Summary of the criticism and of the potential ways to improve acculturation psychology. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(2), 177-180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.03.005>
- Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. S. Valle, & M. King (Eds.), *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology* (p. 6). Oxford University Press.
- Constantine, M. G., Okazaki, S., & Utsey, S. O. (2004). Self-concealment, social self-efficacy, acculturative stress, and depression in African, Asian and Latin American international college students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 74(3), 230-241. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.74.3.230>
- Cox-White, B., & Zimbelmen, J. (1998). Abandoning informed consent: An idea whose time has not yet come. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 23(5), 477-499. <https://doi.org/10.1076/jmep.23.5.477.2566>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

- Cypress, B. S. (2017). Rigor or reliability and validity in qualitative research: Perspectives, strategies, reconceptualization, and recommendations. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 36(4), 253-263. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DCC.0000000000000253>
- Dehshiri, M. R., & Taheri, M. (2016). The role and position of higher education in cultural diplomacy of the United States: Emphasizing its performance towards Iran. *Political Science Quarterly*, 12 (36), 61-98. (In Persian) <https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/1570064/>
- Desa, A., Yusoooff, F., & Abd Kadir, N. B. (2012). Acculturative stress among international postgraduate students at UKM. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 59, 364-369. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.287>
- Di Pietro, G. (2022). Does an international academic environment promote study abroad? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(1), 3-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315320913260>
- Duke, S. T. (2014). *Preparing to Study Abroad: Learning to Cross Cultures* (1st ed.). Stylus Publishing, LLC. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003446453>
- Flournoy, K. (2018). *An investigation of the challenges faced by Ghanaian international students in the American higher education system: A phenomenological multi-case study* (Publication No. 10975416) [Doctoral dissertation, Roosevelt University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2130928208/25EF3B5F01CC4B8%200PQ/1?sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>
- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1986). *Culture Shock: Psychological Reactions to Unfamiliar Environments*. Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Galdan, O. (2019). *International students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment: A case study in south Florida* (Publication No. 13877777) [Doctoral dissertation, St. Thomas University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2297413534/209A28DBB9564611PQ/1#?sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>
- Garcia, D., Al Nima, A., & Kjell, O. N. E. (2014). The affective profiles, psychological well-being, and harmony: Environmental mastery and self-acceptance predict the sense of a harmonious life. *PeerJ*, 2(e259), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.259>
- Garza, D. D. (2015). *The acculturation needs of international students at U.S. universities: A call for online anticipatory orientation* (Publication No. 3713522) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1699102072/AAEE64066E1A41F0PQ/1?sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2012). *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications* (10th ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gbadamosi, A. (2018). *The anatomy of international students' acculturation in UK universities*. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32(2), 129-138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422218760335>
- Gebhard, J., G. (2012). International students' adjustment problems and behaviors. *Journal of International Students*, 2(2), 184-193. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v2i2.529>
- Gibson, M. A. (2001). Immigrant adaptation and patterns of acculturation. *Human Development*, 44(1), 19-23. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000057037>
- Gill, S. (2007). Overseas students' intercultural adaptation as intercultural learning: A transformative framework. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 37(2), 167-183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920601165512>

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

- Gu, Q., Schweisfurth, M., & Day, C. (2010). Learning and growing in a 'foreign' context: Intercultural experiences of international students. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 40(1), 7-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920903115983>
- Hanassab, S. (2006). Diversity, international students, and perceived discrimination: Implications for educators and counselors. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(2), 157-172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305283051>
- Huber, L. (2002). From general education to interdisciplinary studies. *Higher Education Policy*, 15(1), 19-31. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0952-8733\(01\)00032-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0952-8733(01)00032-0)
- Jackson, M., Ray, S., & Bybell, D. (2013). International students in the U.S.: Social and psychological adjustment. *Journal of International Students*, 3(1), 17-28. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v3i1.515>
- Karipek, Y. Z. (2017). Asylum-seekers experience and acculturation: A study of Syrian university students in Turkey. *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 105-133. <https://doi.org/10.26513/toecd.316150>
- Kashima, E. S., & Loh, E. (2006). International students' acculturation: Effects of international, conational, and local ties and need for closure. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 471-485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.12.003>
- Khawaja, N. G., & Dempsey, J. (2008). A comparison of international and domestic tertiary students in Australia. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 18(1), 30-46. <https://doi.org/10.1375/ajgc.18.1.30>
- Khodaverdi, H. (2012). Globalization of higher education in the third millennium: components and dimensions. *International Relations Research Quarterly*, 1(5), 133-164. (In Persian) https://www.iisajournals.ir/article_41911.html
- Kim, E. (2012). An alternative theoretical model: Examining psychological identity development of international students in the United States. *College Student Journal*, 46(1), 99-113.
- Knight J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303260832>
- Lashari, S. A., Awang-Hashim, R., Lashari, T. A., & Kaur, A. (2023). Acculturation stress and social support for international students' adjustment in Malaysia: Does language proficiency matter? *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 15(2), 496-508. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-07-2021-0285>
- Leedy, P. D. (1989). *Practical Research: Planning and Design*. Macmillan.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lopez, S. (2021). *Academic & cultural perceptions and experiences of international students at a Hispanic serving institution of higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd/700/>
- Mahmood, H., & Burke, M. G. (2018). Analysis of acculturative stress and sociocultural adaptation among international students at a non-metropolitan university. *Journal of International Students*, 8(1), 284-307. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i1.166>
- Mak, A. S., & Kim, I. (2011). Korean international students' coping resources and psychological adjustment in Australia. *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society*, 2(1), 56-84. <https://doi.org/10.15685/omnes.2011.06.2.1.56>
- Mao, R., & Liu, Y. (2016). Social support: A moderator between cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Chinese universities. *International Forum of Teaching and Studies*, 12(2), 32-36. <http://americanscholarspress.us/journals/IFST/pdf/IFOTS-2-2016/v12n2-art4.pdf>

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

- Misra, R., Crist, M., & Burant, C. J. (2003). Relationships among life stress, social support, academic stressors, and reactions to stressors of international students in the United States. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 10(2), 137-157. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1072-5245.10.2.137>
- Moerer_Urdahl, T., & Creswell, J. W. (2004). Using transcendental phenomenology to explore the "ripple effect" in a leadership mentoring program. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(2), 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300202>
- Montgomery, C. (2010). *Understanding the International Student Experience*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137-144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x>
- Nachatar Singh, J. K., Schapper, J., & Jack, G. (2014). The importance of place for international students' choice of university: A case study at a Malaysian university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(5), 463-474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314523990>
- Nadeem, M. U., Mohammed, R., Dalib, S., & Mumtaz, S. (2022). An investigation of factors influencing intercultural communication competence of the international students from a higher education institute in Malaysia. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 14(3), 933-945. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-03-2021-0111>
- Ninnes, P. (1999). Acculturation of international students in higher education: Australia. *Education and Society*, 17(1), 73-101. <https://doi.org/10.7459/es/17.1.07>
- Pan, J. Y., Wong, D. F. K., & Ye, S. (2013). Post-migration growth scale for Chinese international students: Development and validation. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14(6), 1639-1655. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9401-z>
- Pang, H., & Wang, J. (2020). Promoting or prohibiting: Understanding the influence of social media on international students' acculturation process, coping strategies, and psychological consequences. *Telematics and Informatics*, 54, 101454. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2020.101454>
- Papatsiba, V. (2005). Student mobility in Europe: An academic, cultural and mental Journey? Some conceptual reflections and empirical findings. In M. Tight (Ed.), *International Relations (International Perspectives on Higher Education Research, Vol. 3)*, (pp. 29-65). Emerald Publishing Group Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3628\(05\)03003-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3628(05)03003-0)
- Park, H., Lee, M. -J, Choi, G. -Y, & Zepernick, J. S. (2017). Challenges and coping strategies of East Asian graduate students in the United States. *International Social Work*, 60(3), 733-749. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872816655864>
- Park, R. E. (1928). Human migration and the marginal man. *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6), 881-893. <https://doi.org/10.1086/214592>
- Park, S. (2022). Academic acculturation of international doctoral students in the U.S.: A qualitative inquiry. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), 16089. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192316089>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Pawar, S. K., Vispute, S., Lslam, T., & Chanda, R. (2020). International students' motivations for studying in Indian universities: Implications for value proposition and positioning strategies. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(2), 158-170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920910579>
- Pham, L., & Saltmarsh, D. (2013). International students' identities in a globalized world: Narratives from Vietnam. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 12(2), 129-141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913481171>

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

- Pitts, M. J. (2009). Identity and the role of expectations, stress, and talk in short-term student sojourner adjustment: An application of the integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(6), 450-462. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.07.002>
- Pogorelova, I. (2016). *A study of intercultural adaptation and the development of intercultural sensitivity of Catalan/Spanish university students during study abroad* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pompeu Fabra (UPF)]. <https://tesisenred.net/bitstream/handle/10803/399299/tip.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Pogorelova, I., & Trenchs, M. (2018). An exploration of life experiences during Study Abroad: A case study of bilingual students and their process of intercultural adaptation. In C. P. Vidal, S. López-Serrano, J. Ament, & D. J. Thomas-Wilhelm (Eds.), *Learning Context Effects: Study Aroad, Formal Instruction and International Immersion Classrooms* (pp. 255-282). Language Science Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1300636>
- Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K. M. (2007). Barriers to adjustment: Needs of international students within a semi-urban campus community. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 34(1), 28-45.
- Poyrazli, S., & Lopez, M. D. (2007). An exploratory study of perceived discrimination and homesickness: A comparison of international students and American students. *The Journal of Psychology*, 141(3), 263-280. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.141.3.263-280>
- Ra, Y. A. (2023). Roles of social support on acculturation stress of Asian international students. *Current Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04696-w>
- Rahman, S. U. (2018). Psychological well-being of international students in Thai universities: Effects of socio-cultural adjustment. *Paper presented at Oriental Business and Innovation Center Conference (OBC-2)*, Budapest, Hungary, May 10th, 2018.
- Rajapaksa, S., & Dundes, L. (2002). It's a long way home: International student adjustment to living in the United States. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.2190/5HCY-U2Q9-KVGL-8M3K>
- Rasmi, S., Safdar, S. F., & Lewis, J. R. (2009). A longitudinal examination of the MIDA model with international students. In A. Chybicka, S. F. Safdar, & A. Kwiatkowska (Eds.), *Culture & Gender: An Intimate Relation* (pp. 42-57). Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. J. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38(1), 149-152. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1936.38.1.02a00330>
- Sam, D. L., & Berry, J. W. (2010). Acculturation: When individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds meet. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(4), 472-481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610373075>
- Sam, D. L., & Berry, J. W. (2016). *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316219218>
- Schwartz, S. J., Unger, J. B., Zamboanga, B. L., & Szapocznik, J. (2010). Rethinking the concept of acculturation: Implications for theory and research. *American Psychologist*, 65(4), 237-251. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019330>
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(4), 449-464. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(90\)90030-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(90)90030-Z)
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Sharif, R. (2019). The relations between acculturation and creativity and innovation in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Educational Research Review*, 28, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100287>
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60(1), 33-46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z>

Pakzad, M., Abbaspour, A., Rahimian, H., & Khorsandi Taskoh, A.

- Singaravelu, H. D., & Pope, M. (Eds.). (2007). *A Handbook for Counseling International Students in the United States*. American Counseling Association.
- Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699-713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>
- Sokolova, E. V., Voevoda, E. V., & Morozov, V. M. (2022). Sociocultural adaptive stressors of international students in Russia. *Perspektivy Nauki i Obrazovania – Perspectives of Science and Education*, 59(5), 476-490. <https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2022.5.28>
- Stonequist, E. V. (1935). The problem of the marginal man. *American Journal of Sociology*, 41(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1086/217001>
- Sullivan, C., & Kashubeck-West, S. (2015). The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.438>
- Townsend, P., & Poh, H. J. (2008). An exploratory study of international students studying and living in a regional area. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 18(2), 240-263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841240802487411>
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. The Althouse Press.
- Vulić-Prtorić, A., & Oetjen, N. (2017). Adaptation and acculturation of international students in Croatia. *Collegium Antropologicum*, 41(4), 335-343. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/301954>
- Ward, C. (2008). Thinking outside the Berry boxes: New perspectives on identity, acculturation and intercultural relations. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32(2), 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2007.11.002>
- Williams, T. R. (2005). Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: Adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(4), 356-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305277681>
- Wilton, L., & Constantine, M. G. (2003). Length of residence, cultural adjustment difficulties, and psychological distress symptoms in Asian and Latin American international college students. *Journal of College Counseling*, 6(2), 177-186. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2003.tb00238.x>
- Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*, 2015, 202753. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>
- Xu, F. (2019). *The acculturation process and strategies of first-generation Chinese students in Canadian higher education* [Master's thesis, Brock University]. https://dr.library.brocku.ca/bitstream/handle/10464/14507/MRP_Xu_Fangqing_2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 16(1), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951507031000114058>
- Yieh, T. K. (1934). *The Adjustment Problems of Chinese Graduate Students in American Universities*. University of Chicago Press.
- Yilmaz, K., & Temizkan, V. (2022). The effects of educational service quality and socio-cultural adaptation difficulties on international students' higher education satisfaction. *Sage Open*, 12(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221078316>

International Students & Acculturation Challenges

- Zaker Salehi, G., & Salehi Najafabadi, M. (2012). Presenting strategies for attracting foreign students in Iran. *Journal of Iranian Higher Education Association*, 4(3), 65-92. (In Persian) <https://ihej.ir/article-1-626-fa.html>
- Zlobina, A., Basabe, N., Paez, D., & Furnham, A. (2006). *Sociocultural adjustment of immigrants: Universal and group-specific predictors*. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(2), 195-211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.005>

Dr. Mahza Pakzad is affiliated with Department of Educational Administration and Planning, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. She got her Ph.D. degree with honor in Higher Education Management from Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Iran. She was proudly awarded a full research mobility grant in the framework of the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Program by the European Union to undertake an academic research stay in Barcelona, Spain (2022-2023). She was also honored to have been accepted by Sapienza University of Rome, for a study opportunity during her doctoral studies, allowing her to spend her sabbatical leave in Italy. In her resume, a track record of published articles in reputable journals, active participation in scientific conferences, and a background of teaching at prestigious universities in Tehran are highlighted. Her areas of interest include Internationalization of Higher Education, Cultural Diplomacy, Cross-Cultural Interactions of International Students, etc.

Prof. Abbas Abbaspour is affiliated with Department of Educational Administration and Planning, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. He got his Ph.D. in Management from University of Tehran, Iran. He has extensively published research in reputable journals and presented orally in prestigious international conferences. He has also more than 20 years of top-level management and consulting experience in public and private organizations.

Dr. Hamid Rahimian (Associate Prof.) is affiliated with the Department of Educational Administration and Planning, Faculty of Psychology & Education, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. He got his M.A. in Educational Administration from George Mason University, USA in 1986 and his Ph.D. in Educational Administration from University of Maryland, USA in 1992. He has served three times as the head of department at ATU. He is also the founder of the Institute of Management Research and Education which is affiliated with the Ministry of Energy, Iran.

Dr. Ali Khorsandi Taskoh (Associate Prof.) is affiliated with the Department of Educational Administration & Planning at Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. He got his Ph.D. degree in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Western Ontario, CANADA.



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) (CC BY-NC 4.0) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.