Survey of Indian Medical Students' Adaptation in Kazakhstan: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Academic Dimensions

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Abstract

This study investigated international students' adaptation experience in a higher education institution. A sociological survey was conducted among one hundred and seventy Indian students in their first and second year of medical studies at West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University, Aktobe, the Republic of Kazakhstan. Against the background of many studies in this field, this topic is contextualized within the higher medical education system in the western region of Kazakhstan. The study helps to improve understanding of such phenomena as international students' dimensions of psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation. The differences in the various dimensions of adaptation from the gender perspective and the year of study were investigated. The impact of the adaptation level on the students' study achievements was assessed.

The study results demonstrated challenges in psychological adaptation in the first-year international students, which decreased over time. The differences in the psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptability between girls and boys were not statistically significant. Second-year international students felt more emotionally comfortable and psychologically safe in the group, and this reflected their high grades GPA. Based on the findings, the authors propose recommendations on how to improve the international students' comfortableness in the Kazakhstani university setting.

Keywords: international students, psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation, academic adaptation, medical education.

Исследование адаптации индийских студентов-медиков в Казахстане: психологический, социокультурный и академический аспекты

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Аннотация
Статья посвящена изучению адаптации иностранных студентов в высшем учебном заведении. Социологический опрос был проведен среди 170 индийских студентов, обучающихся на первом и втором курсах факультета общей медицины в Западно-Казахстанском медицинском университете имени Марата Оспанова, г. Актобе, Республика Казахстан. На фоне многих исследований в этой области данная тема контекстуализирована в системе высшего медицинского образования в западном регионе Казахстана. Исследование вносит ясность в различные аспекты адаптации иностранных студентов, а именно психологической, социокультурной и академической адаптации. Были исследованы различия в результатах исследования с точки зрения пола иностранных студентов и года их обучения. Оценивалось влияние уровня адаптации на академическую успеваемость студентов. Результаты исследования продемонстрировали у иностранных студентов первого курса значительные трудности в психологической адаптации, которые со временем уменьшались. Различия в психологической, социокультурной и академической адаптации девушек и юношей не были статистически значимыми. Иностранные студенты второго курса чувствовали себя в группе более эмоционально и психологически комфортно, и это повлияло на их высокие оценки. На основании полученных результатов могут быть предложены рекомендации по повышению качества жизни и обучения иностранных студентов в казахстанском университете.
Ключевые слова: иностранные студенты, социально-психологическая адаптация, социокультурная адаптация, педагогическая адаптация, медицинское образование.

Introduction

One of the priorities in the development of modern higher education in Kazakhstan is the expansion of international cooperation in the field of education and science (Abdiraiymova et al., 2013). The accession of Kazakhstan to the Bologna Process in 2010 contributed to the involvement of many universities in the country in the international education space, promoted HEIs to international standards, and European ones in particular (Bischof, 2018). Enrollment of international students at the University is evidence of the country's authority, the international status of the University, and one of the ways to integrate into the global intellectual community.

Kazakhstani higher medical education is popular among the representatives of the Republic of India, and the number of Indian students at the medical universities of Kazakhstan grows every year. It is explained by lack of access to high-quality education in India as the demand for education in the country is not met by supply. As the Research Editor of WENR Trines states, having nearly the largest tertiary-age population in the world, the tertiary gross enrollment rate (GER) in India stands at only 25.8 percent, despite the opening of ever-more HEIs. Large and growing numbers of aspiring youth remain locked out of the higher education system (Trines, 2018). These factors force young Indian people willing to take higher education, especially in medicine to apply for Kazakhstani universities and higher education institutions of other countries. Thus, Indian students studying at the Kazakhstani university for a certain time become part of Kazakhstani society.

Yang, Zhang, & Sheldon in their research (Yang et al., 2017) state challenges for international students that are "brought by such experience as they leave their familiar world behind, and try to adjust to a new physical, cultural, and linguistic location (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Due to difficulties in communication, lack of social support, and unsettling cultural differences, foreign students sometimes report a profound sense of isolation (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994), intense feelings of depression (Ying & Liese, 1991), and plummeting levels of subjective well-being (i.e, lower satisfaction, lower positive affect and also higher negative affect) (Chirkov et al., 2007). Moreover, some international students even suffer from the experience of "culture shock." (Oberg, 1960: 177) first described culture shock as "precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse". Recent literature described culture shock as maladaptive psychological reactions and mental disorders that occur in response to the transition from one cultural setting to another (Harvey & Park, 2012). Research has demonstrated that the experience of culture shock also negatively impacts international students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Presbitero, 2016).

Adaptation of international students to local cultures is a necessary condition and a way of socialization. It allows them to actively join different elements of the social environment, and respond to dynamic changes in the external environment (Biyekenov, 2012: 36). An international student needs to get used to the new climate and living conditions, the new system of education, the new language of communication, the international character of the student body, and another culture.

In this respect, we propose that international students' adjustment to the new environment may be meaningfully divided into three domains: psychological, sociocultural, and academic. Psychological adaptation refers to emotional comfortableness and psychological satisfaction (Ward & Kennedy, 1999: 660) of international students in a foreign setting. Sociocultural adaptation denotes the acquisition of "culturally appropriate skills and negotiating interactive aspects of the host environment" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999: 660). Unfamiliarity with the new academic system often generates

difficulties for international students (Lin & Yi, 1997). The new educational system, with a completely new design, new assessment methods, and having different demands lead international students to a variety of difficulties. Fulfilling the demands of new academic systems, international students face numerous challenges including assessment, course selection, understanding lectures, communication with teachers and home assignments, etc. (Hussain & Shen, 2019).

Due to the increasing population of young Indians among international medical students in Kazakhstan, it is important to investigate how they are adapted to the target culture, language, climate, setting, etc. In total, 294 foreign students from India study at West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University, Aktobe city, the Republic of Kazakhstan (WKMU): 50 students in the first year, 99 students in the second year, 92 students in the third year, 46 students in the fourth year, and 7 students in the fifth year. Of these, 44 are girls and 250 are boys. From our observations, foreign students represent a rather closed community with limited cultural contacts with the environment.

In this respect, this study was adopted to determine international students' state of adaptation among Indian students currently studying at WKMU. Three dimensions of international students' adaptation, i.e. psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation will be considered in the study. We hypothesize that successful adaptation of international students results in their high GPA scores. Differences in adaptation between groups of girls and boys, first-year and second-year students, and impact of the state of adaptation on the overall study achievements were measured.

Methodology

A sociological survey was carried out between January and June 2019. The survey questionnaire was aimed at assessing the level of adaptability of international students on social, cultural, psychological, academic, and professional issues.

The study focused on the international students who arrived in Kazakhstan within the last year and a half, as the length of residence may also influence the adjustment difficulties (Hsiao-ping et al, 2015). Participants included 170 (142 males and 28 female) Indian students (mean age=20.0 years) studying at WKMU. The sample inclusion criteria were participants in their first and second years of medical studies. One hundred and seventy completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 89%). This was convenience sampling since all the returned questionnaires were included in the sample.

The participants completed a 19-item survey containing questions on various dimensions of adaptation. We consider three sub-dimensions of international students' adaptation: psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation. The development of the Adaptation Scale was inspired by the 101-item Rogers-Diamond methodology (1954), Ward and Kennedy's (1999) 41-item Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), and Pascarella & Terenzini's study (1980). The Rogers-Diamond methodology (1954) is a personality questionnaire aimed at identifying the personality characteristics of the person being tested and the degree of socio-psychological adaptation. We modified integral indicators of the methodology to evaluate the level of students' socio-psychological adaptation (Items 1-6). The SCAS is a flexible instrument and can be easily modified according to the characteristics of the sample at the time (Ward & Kennedy, 1999: 662). Questionnaire statements 7 to 12 were extracted from the SCAS related to students' sociocultural adaptation. Statements 13 to 19 were selected from Pascarella and Terenzini's scale of academic adjustment of students.

A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the students' adaptation levels. The survey data were used for identifying students' challenges and struggles in various dimensions of adaptation. Data analysis, descriptive statistics, and correlation statistics were used for the survey data. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS Statistics and was estimated on the total (n=167) sample.

Results

The research findings demonstrated that the International Students' Adaptation Scale is a reliable and valid measurement of sociocultural and academic adaptability in international Indian students at WKMU. The overall Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the 19 items was .874 (Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability Results of Dimensions of International Students' Adaptation

Item	Scale Mean if item deleted	Scale Variance if item deleted	SD if item deleted	Corrected item-total correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted
Q1	96.38922	207.5671	14.40719	0.368947	0.872555
Q2	96.04790	206.0217	14.35345	0.429693	0.870587
Q3	95.71856	213.5316	14.61272	0.214388	0.877278
Q4	95.71856	209.3519	14.46900	0.354316	0.872866
Q5	95.10180	211.3848	14.53908	0.303233	0.874309
Q6	96.51497	208.7767	14.44911	0.281241	0.876232
Q7	95.04790	203.4947	14.26516	0.569808	0.866691
Q8	95.67066	203.4185	14.26249	0.493874	0.868509
Q9	95.70060	204.9642	14.31657	0.402265	0.871613
Q10	95.46706	203.3986	14.26179	0.565144	0.866759
Q11	95.54491	204.6432	14.30536	0.453721	0.869802
Q12	95.21557	204.8038	14.31097	0.501683	0.868498
Q13	96.12575	202.1459	14.21780	0.480883	0.868841
Q14	96.22156	188.9150	13.74463	0.679547	0.860509
Q15	96.23952	194.0504	13.93020	0.562654	0.865649
Q16	96.08982	190.6207	13.80654	0.645360	0.862049
Q17	96.23952	191.7031	13.84569	0.558894	0.865996
Q18	96.19162	188.7298	13.73790	0.647343	0.861835
Q19	95.98802	190.5986	13.80575	0.637497	0.862366

(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

The questionnaire consisted of three dimensions: psychological adaptation (items 1-6), sociocultural adaptation (items 7-12), and academic adaptation (items 13-19) (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Survey Responses

Items	M	SD
1. Emotional comfort	4.77	1.33
2. Psychological safety in a group	5.44	1.31
3. Self-esteem	5.10	1.30
4. Self-rating	5.43	1.25
5. Respect for others	6.04	1.25
6. Interest in others	4.63	1.52
7. I can follow the rules and regulations at the University	6.15	1.12
8. I can deal with the administration at the University	5.52	1.27
9. I can deal with people of higher status at the University	5.49	1.39
10. I understand what is required from me at the University	5.69	1.16
11. I can cope with academic work	5.64	1.28
12. I can express my ideas in class	5.96	1.17
13. I am satisfied with the extent of my intellectual development since enrolling in this University	5.07	1.38
14. I am satisfied with my academic experience at this University	4.94	1.71
15. Few of my courses this year have been intellectually stimulating	4.92	1.70
16. My academic experience has had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas	5.08	1.70
17. I am more likely to attend academic events now than I was before coming to this University	4.92	1.85
18. My interest in ideas and intellectual matters has increased since coming to this University	4.98	1.79
19. I have performed academically as well as I anticipated I would	5.17	1.72

(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

Analysis of three dimensions of international students' adaptation showed the following results: psychological adaptation 5.2294 (mean for items 1-6), sociocultural adaptation 5.7343 (mean for items 7-12), and academic adaptation 5.0100 (mean for items 13-19). Thus, sociocultural adaptation showed a higher level (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of Adaptation Dimensions

Sum	N	Mean	Median	Min	Max	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	Std. Dev.
1-6	170	31.3765	32.0000	0.00	42.0000	29.00000	35.0000	5.41415
7-12	170	34.4059	35.0000	0.00	42.0000	32.00000	38.0000	5.37416
13-19	170	35.0706	37.0000	0.00	49.0000	32.00000	41.0000	9.58585
Total	170	100.8529	102.0000	0.00	133.0000	95.00000	111.0000	15.50059

(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

Differences in international students' adaptation between groups of girls and boys were tested by Mann-Whitney U-test (Table 4). Results showed that there were no statistically significant differences in the parameters from groups 1 (girls, n=28) and 2 (boys, n=142).

Table 4. Correlation of Students Adaptation and Gender

Item	Sum rank - group 1 (girls)	Sum rank - group 2 (boys)	U	Z	p	Z	p	2-tailed
Q1	2211.500	12323.50	1805.500	-0.76461	0.444504	-0.79556	0.426288	0.445299
Q2	2121.000	12414.00	1715.000	-1.14482	0.252286	-1.18733	0.235099	0.253785
Q3	2107.000	12428.00	1701.000	-1.20363	0.228732	-1.25169	0.210682	0.230085
Q4	2195.000	12340.00	1789.000	-0.83393	0.404321	-0.86262	0.388348	0.406337
Q5	2237.000	12298.00	1831.000	-0.65748	0.510872	-0.70477	0.480953	0.512887
Q6	2015.500	12349.50	1637.500	-1.19714	0.231254	-1.22903	0.219062	0.231830
Q7	2369.000	12166.00	1963.000	-0.10293	0.918020	-0.11153	0.911195	0.918472
Q8	2410.500	12124.50	1971.500	0.06722	0.946408	0.06993	0.944249	0.945041
Q9	2567.000	11798.00	1787.000	0.78860	0.430347	0.81792	0.413406	0.432388
Q10	2671.000	11864.00	1711.000	1.16162	0.245390	1.22001	0.222464	0.246848
Q11	2281.500	12253.50	1875.500	-0.47053	0.637977	-0.49271	0.622219	0.638213
Q12	2333.500	12201.50	1927.500	-0.25207	0.800987	-0.26594	0.790285	0.800431
Q13	2071.000	12464.00	1665.000	-1.35487	0.175458	-1.39805	0.162100	0.176402
Q14	1979.000	12556.00	1573.000	-1.74138	0.081618	-1.80158	0.071613	0.081599
Q15	2194.000	12341.00	1788.000	-0.83813	0.401957	-0.86216	0.388602	0.403971
Q16	2358.500	12176.50	1952.500	-0.14704	0.883100	-0.15331	0.878155	0.882091
Q17	2205.500	12329.50	1799.500	-0,78982	0.429634	-0.80992	0.417986	0.430447
Q18	2327.500	12207.50	1921.500	-0.27728	0.781568	-0.28369	0.776650	0.781115
Q19	2191.500	12343.50	1785.500	-0.84863	0.396085	-0.87917	0.379308	0.396921

* Marked correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$
(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

The Mann-Whitney U-test showed statistically significant differences (Table 5) in such parameters as year study (group 1 – first-year, n=90, and group 2 – second-year, n=80). Q1 and Q2 were statistically significant when compared to other parameters which were non-significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5. Correlation of Students Adaptation and Year of Study

Item	Sum rank - group 1	Sum rank - group 2	U	Z	p	Z	p
Q1	7004.000	7531.000	2909.000	**-2.15571**	**0.031107**	**-2.24297**	**0.024900**
Q2	6916.000	7619.000	2821.000	**-2.43044**	**0.015081**	**-2.52069**	**0.011713**
Q3	7324.500	7210.500	3229.500	-1.15512	0248041	-1.20125	0.229656
Q4	7562.500	6972.500	3467.500	-0.41210	0.680268	-0.42627	0.669909
Q5	7594.500	6940.500	3499.500	-0.31220	0.754892	-0.33465	0.737889
Q6	7297.000	7068.000	3202.000	-1.11068	0.266705	-1.14027	0.254174
Q7	7785.000	6750.000	3510.000	0.27941	0.779927	0.30277	0.762066
Q8	7740.000	6795.000	3555.000	0.13893	0.889508	0.14453	0.885080
Q9	8139.000	6226.000	3066.000	1.53920	0.123756	1.59642	0.110395
Q10	8054.000	6481.000	3241.000	1.11922	0.263047	1.17547	0.239806
Q11	7268.000	7267.000	3173.000	-1.33151	0.183021	-1.39427	0.163236
Q12	7813.500	6721.500	3481.500	0.36839	0.712582	0.38866	0.697526
Q13	7162.000	7373.000	3067.000	-1.66244	0.096426	-1.71541	0.086270
Q14	7373.000	7162.000	3278.000	-1.00371	0.315520	-1.03840	0.299083
Q15	7485.500	7049.500	3390.500	-0.65249	0.514087	-0.67119	0.502099
Q16	7982.000	6553.000	3313.000	0.89444	0.371087	0.93256	0.351046
Q17	8092.500	6442.500	3202.500	1.23942	0.215193	1.27096	0.203743
Q18	7569.500	6965.500	3474.500	-0.39024	0.696356	-0.39927	0.689697
Q19	7549.500	6985.500	3454.500	-0.45268	0.650777	-0.46897	0.639089

* Marked correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$
(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

Spearman's Rank Correlation was used to test for the possible relationship between the level of students' adaptation to the university and their study achievements (GPA scores). Research results demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between the second-year international students' adaptation level and GPA scores (Table 6).

Table 6. Relation of Students' Adaptation to GPA Scores According to Years of Study

Variables	Year of study	N	Spearman r	t(N-2)	P
Total Sum & GPA	1	90	-0.053611	-0.503643	0.615771
Total Sum & GPA	2	**80**	**0.308880**	**2.868205**	**0.005308**

* Marked correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$
(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis

Within three dimensions of adaptation – psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation, and academic adaptation, the latter was related to high GPA scores of international students of the second year of study (Table 7).

Table 7. Relation of Students' Adaptation Dimensions to GPA Scores

Variables	Year of study	N	Spearman r	t(N-2)	P
Psychological adaptation & GPA	1	90	0.036817	0.34561	0.730460
Sociocultural adaptation & GPA	1	90	0.037415	0.35123	0.726255
Academic adaptation & GPA	1	90	-0.133952	-1.26801	0.208140
Psychological adaptation & GPA	2	80	0.147554	1.317582	0.191501
Sociocultural adaptation & GPA	2	80	0.160033	1.431825	0.156189
Academic adaptation & GPA	2	**80**	**0.221834**	**2.009245**	0.047970

* Marked correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$
(Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical analysis)

Discussion

This study is among the first to explore international students' adaptation from the perspective of three dimensions of adaptation: psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation. Of the three dimensions, sociocultural adaptation scored the highest in the international students at WKMU showing their ability to demonstrate culturally appropriate skills and negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). These results contradict the claims of Yang et al. (2017) that international students struggle to adjust to a new location as they leave a familiar background; Ying & Liese (1991), Oberg (1960), and Brislin & Yoshida (1994) that students feel depressed and isolated due to difficulties in communication and unsettling cultural differences. The study results on academic adaptation which was scored the lowest compared to other dimensions agree with previous research (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hussain & Shen, 2019). The main reasons for this finding might be related to unfamiliarity with the new academic system, a completely new design, new assessment methods, understanding lectures and methods of teaching, and/or communication with teachers, and home assignments.

The study sheds light on gender perspectives in international students' adaptation to a university setting, which has not been the subject of previous research in this field. The results indicate that there were no differences in international students' adaptation between girls and boys. From the perspective of the year of study, the data showed that psychological safety in the group and emotional comfort of the international students were higher during the second year.

We aimed to study the influences of three dimensions of international students' adaptation on their study achievements' growth (GPA scores) over the first two-year period of the university. Thus, the relationship between international students' adaptation level which was in general higher than average, and their grades was not noticed in the first-year students. Contrary to the hypothesized association of students' adaptation and grades, their GPA scores remained low despite the normal level of adaptation dimensions. Based on the model comparison, it was discovered that international students' academic adaptation significantly and positively influenced students' study achievement over some time. These findings are in line with the studies of Syroid (2009), Merkulova (2010), Kaidalova & Cherkashina (2014), Danhui et al. (2018).

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Our conclusions are based on self-assessment of international students from the same medical university and therefore, the results may be biased (overestimation and/or underestimation). However, comparison

with objective results as students' study achievements results (GPA score) helps to confirm our findings.

The study results offer implications for instructors and university administrative staff to help international students gain academic success. For a better adaptation to a foreign university reality, we suggest that the host institution should engage international students in the university social life and various academic activities which make international students easily adjust to the new environment and gain academic success in their field.

Conclusion

The results of the study demonstrate that Indian international students at the West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University face challenges at different levels. The focus of the study was on three dimensions of international students' adaptation: psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation; gender differences in adaptation; and impact of adaptation on the students' study achievements results (GPA score).

The findings show that challenges in psychological adaptation are the greatest upon entering a new culture and decrease predictably over time. There were no statistically significant differences in the psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptability between girls and boys.

But the relationship between the academic adaptation and international students' academic achievements was noticed in two issues. In the second year of their studies, international students felt more emotionally comfortable and psychologically safe in the group and this reflected their high grades GPA.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethics

All the research procedures met the ethical guidelines of the West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University and were approved by the Local Ethical Committee of the University. The data gathered and used in this study are available and can be accessed via email to kuzembayeva@mail.ru

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