

Academic and adaptation challenges faced by international students: A case study of MUET, Jamshoro

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Abstract

The present study aimed at exploring how academic and adaptation challenges affect the lives of international students at a public-sector university of Sindh i.e. Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro. It was a case study and ten international undergraduate students were treated as ten different cases. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from each of them. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed thematically. The findings suggested that the foreign students in MUET, Jamshoro faced both academic and adaptation challenges. These included, English language problems in terms of their inability to understand lectures if English is not the medium of instruction, difficulty surviving in the new environment due to uncommon language between them and the locals, all of which lead to identity shift and social stigma. So, teachers should make sure they cater to the needs of both national and international students. Once, the issue of medium of instruction will be sorted, the students' learning experience will be remarkable. They will have time to focus on their studies, after that they will gradually learn Urdu which will help them survive and adjust in their new social and academic environment. These students have to invest in learning a new language, improving English, and adapting to the host environment by all means.

Keywords, Adaptation, Academic, English Language, MUET, challenges.

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1. Introduction

Education is a basic right of every human being. Students travel across the globe to pursue studies. These students are called international students at respective institutions. An international student is the one who has physically crossed an international border between two countries in order to participate in educational activities in a certain country that is different from their country of origin (Nita et. al., 2017). A common definition of international students describes them as students who move to the host country for the purpose of pursuing tertiary or higher education e.g., college or university" (Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomas, 2014). Higher education institutes share complex relationships on international level. Hence, the international students help strengthen the relationships by their impact on host countries and universities in different ways, like: social, cultural, economic, educational, environmental and political (Proctor and Rumbly, 2018, as cited in Vanleeuwen and Brennan, 2020).

In Pakistan also, international students at different universities have contributed to the academic and economic growth of their host and sending institutions, which is the reason foreign learners have gained importance in higher education (Knight, 2015; Varghese, 2008, as cited in Zafar, 2018). International students could be some of those learners who may have trouble getting all the benefits at a host university.

Seeking education in a different cultural, educational and linguistic environment, international students in graduate programs have needs and challenges unlike those of their local counterparts (Vanleeuwen and Brennan, 2020). International students face a number of challenges upon entering the university in a foreign country. Most of the students may find pursuing studies at a foreign university as an exciting goal. Nonetheless, it is a challenging experience for some of them because of the multiple difficulties they may encounter in their adjustment to the new environment (Yeoh and Terry, 2013). The challenges are a result of the change of their personal, demographic and social environment. Since these students move out of their homes and try to adjust in another country-a new environment, their perceptions of the world, its people, their emotions and behavior may

not be similar to what is shared and experienced by the individuals of the new university.

Hence, in this study, the international students of one of the public-sector engineering universities of Sindh i.e. Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro (MUET) were focused. The purpose of focusing international students was that these students belong to different countries (Jordan, Somalia, Palestine, Oman and Sudan), and represent a different linguistic, cultural and social background. Ryan and Carroll (2005) define international students as those who travel to another country in pursuit of higher studies. Their prior educational experience is that of a different educational system, in another cultural context and sometimes in a different medium of instruction-which is unlike the one in which they will now be taught. These differences are usually barriers in students' learning in a new country.

The international undergraduate students of MUET whose first languages are different, may face challenges more than their host counterparts. However, it is important to explore the academic and adaptation challenges of these students and how they tackle with these challenges.

Aim:

The main aim of this study is to explore the academic and adaptation challenges of international students while studying at one of the Pakistani public-sector engineering universities-MUET, Jamshoro.

Objective:

1. To explore how the academic and adaptation challenges faced by international students affect their lives.
2. To identify how international students tackle with these challenges.

Research Questions:

1. How do the academic and adaptation challenges affect the lives of international students?
2. How do international students tackle with these challenges?

Literature Review:

Based on the international (Fennell, 2020, and Park, 2016) and national (Zafar et al., 2018) studies it has been found out that international students experience different academic, adjustment, linguistic, social, and psychological issues during their studies in various universities of the world. Similarly, international students who come to Pakistani public-sector universities for higher studies are likely to face problems.

It is important for researchers to explore and comprehend factors that contribute to the overall well-being of the international student population and to the existing literature pertaining to the mental health of college students. Adaptation being an interactive and dynamic process takes place between the person and the environment, and requires an achievement of the fit between the two (Anderson, 1994).

Tackling with these requires the resources provided by the university along with an individual's own personality traits and characteristics (Brown and Halloway, 2008). One's own willingness to adjust in a new environment counts.

International students experience quite a number of issues while studying abroad. They are stressed because they have trouble in adjustment which appears as physical complaint that does not have physical basis; cognitive fatigue, seen as cultural confusion and disorientation along with difficulty concentrating; and psychological symptoms including feelings of isolation, sadness, loss, homesickness, resentment, and frustration. These may grow to feelings of hopelessness, and helplessness sometimes associated with depression (Mori, 2000).

Besides, using a second or foreign language in order to survive and balance the graduate academic difficulties in a new educational environment, most of the international graduate students experience ambiguity and stress during their stay. The intensity and level of stress is affected by various factors, such as the connection between graduate curricula and international students' prior knowledge and experiences, students' familiarity with academic policies and regulations, cultural differences in learning styles and expectations, along with student-faculty academic relationships (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012; Knutson, 2011; Li & Tierney, 2013).

In addition to this, international students' academic challenges include those related to speaking, like they have trouble asking and answering questions during the class. They also face difficulty in listening when it comes to understanding the lectures (Airey and Linder, 2006). These problems usually arise because the international students have not been taught in English previously. Other studies have reported that students faced troubles

while taking notes from academic material (Hellekjaer, 2010) and comprehending lecturers accents (Tange, 2010). According to Park (2016), accented English was a trigger of communication issues. Indeed, language is one of the reasons of poor communication.

Hence, international students face both adaptation and academic issues. Adaptation issues appear as anxiety, loneliness, homesickness etc. Academic issues are related to the language of instruction, a different teaching methodology, new syllabus, and teacher-student relationship.

Research Methodology:

The present study was conducted in 2021 using the case study as a research method. Foreign students of Mehran University of Engineering and Technology were the case of this study. Ten undergraduate international students from different departments were selected to participate in this study. These students were selected through snowball sampling technique where one international student brought other interested students like him. They were contacted through phone calls. All the participants were completely known to the study beforehand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually.

Sample of the Study:

According to Dornyei (2007) this type of sampling refers to having a principled list of key respondents who are asked to bring in further participants-similar to them somehow serving the same investigation.

Participants of the Study:

The participants of this study were undergraduate students of five different departments of Engineering. They were ten male students.

Instrument of the Study:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to achieve the objectives of the study. These interviews require the researcher to have pre-prepared questions to ask and their responses are open-ended. This kind of interview helps in producing qualitative data through the use of open questions. This method, is popular among educational researchers, and offers flexibility; it allows to achieve depth (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989).

Data Analysis:

As it is a qualitative study, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. It helped analyze the transcribed data as it is a popular technique to identify, analyze and report the patterns that exist in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It includes noting patterns, themes, and categories. Thematic analysis is therefore, a common method used for analyzing qualitative data in different disciplines and fields. It can be applied in many ways, to different datasets, to address different research questions.

Findings of the Study

The findings of this study revealed that almost all of the participants face academic and adaptation challenges while studying in MUET, Jamshoro.

Adaptation Challenges:

Initially, adjust and adopt environment is one biggest problems of international students. They live in doubt as they have left their own country and do not quite fit into the host country (Temitayo, 2020). Lee (2015) believes that the international students face problems like visa procedures, social isolation, cultural norms, discrimination, and second language learning. These problems make it difficult for them to adjust. The experience of adaptation in order to adjust may lead to change in the participants' communication, behavior and perspectives.

Struggling to survive in MUET or Positioning:

International students come from a different socio-linguistic environment this is why they have to struggle to survive in MUET. According to the participants of this study, it takes time and effort to make 'place' for oneself in a new environment. Habitus can also shape what learners desire; however, it is the desire that compels learners to act and exercise their agency. It is usually because learners want to be part of a country or group, to achieve financial security, learners invest because there is something that they want for themselves it is part of the structure of desire, as comprehensively theorized by Motha and Lin (2014). Learners are oftentimes forced or bound to act in the very manner which gives them acceptance or denies it. In case of MUET, international students are positioned by teachers, local students and administration as foreigners. Sometimes, the teachers' and local students' behaviors make them feel 'at home' and at other times they are treated like outsiders because teachers put local students' needs on top of the needs of international students. Some Universities, by narrowly focusing on language or academic needs, miss other needs of international students (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007).

International students have problems beyond language and academics which should be taken care of. They have moved to another country and it is not easy to make one's place. They lack social and cultural capital because their knowledge and skills are not valued in their new academic environment. Consequently, they turn to their international friends and sometimes, local friends for help.

Social Stigma:

The final theme which emerged was the social stigma. The participants of this study expressed their concerns over how they were at times, taken advantage of, laughed at, and dealt with dishonesty and grudge on part of the local students. All of this, seems to have affected their academic and social lives.

One of the participants, mentioned that some of his classmates were not nice to him and not helpful:

“Not really no, not any Pakistani friend. That's my bad luck because most of them or all of them are not good with me., they are not helpful. They are not friendly. That's why. They are rude... If they want to help you, maybe they will help you once, they don't want to help you but if they want, maybe they will help you one time after. The respect, they don't deserve the word friend.. you can say colleagues, or maybe class fellows...”

He was a first-year student and unfortunately, he did not have Pakistani friends because they did not treat him well. They were rude to him, not friendly and not even helpful. This had affected his social life, as he chose to be with international friends only and was very particular about using the word ‘friend’ because according to his experience, not everyone deserved to be called a ‘friend’. According to Ward (2001) the international students often mentioned loneliness and created friendships with those from their own countries to fight this. International students face various special and unique challenges while trying to adjust to academic and cultural enclosing like language barriers, cultural differences and racial discrimination, social interaction and personal adjustment difficulties in their life (Reid and Dixon, 2012, as cited in Can, et.al., 2021).

Academic challenges

Communication barrier:

Another major theme that emerged from the data was language barrier because the participants’ mother tongue is Arabic and not all of them are good at English. If they are good at English then people around either do not speak English or they cannot understand their accent. Hence, these students not only have to learn English but also a local language. Studies have found out the issue of language barriers as one of the major challenges for non-English speaking international students in English speaking countries (Andrade, 2006; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Wright & Schartner, 2013). This is not only a major challenge in English speaking countries but also in countries like Pakistan where English is an official language and many languages like Sindhi, Urdu, Siraiki, etc. to name a few are locally spoken.

Therefore, after their arrival in Pakistan, international students struggle to communicate. They have to learn both English and Urdu (Pakistan’s national language) in order to survive because the locals like, their landlords or shopkeepers do not usually speak or know English. They emphasize that they cannot do without Urdu since no one outside the university speaks or understands English. They have to learn Urdu.

One of the participants said:

“Most of the time I practice to learn the language more to communicate to other friends, local friends, like in their own language, try to improve it sometimes. Mostly, watch the Bollywood movies try to get some new sentences, new words to convey to other people make it much better easy. So now somehow, but I still need more.”

He consciously makes effort to learn Urdu so he can communicate with others and he thinks he still needs to know more Urdu. It shows how he is trying to attain both cultural and social capital.

Ways to help international students tackle with these challenges:

EMI:

Teachers should use English as a medium of instruction at undergraduate level in MUET. This will help ease the learning experience of international students who know and understand English better.

Zero Semester:

MUET should introduce a zero or foundation semester for international students. This semester can last for two months and offer basic crash courses like, English, Urdu, Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry so that these students can prepare for upcoming semesters. Offering English and Urdu as courses will lessen students’ burden to cope up with academic and adjustment difficulties.

Foreigners’ Hostels:

There should be separate hostels for international students where they may live as they want. They could be

allowed to use their own AC/Fridge which they can use during their stay and pay their bills.

CONCLUSION:

The results of this study helped explore many challenges faced by the undergraduate international students of MUET. It has been found out that, these students had both academic and adaptation challenges. These included, English language problems in terms of their inability to understand lectures if English is not the medium of instruction, difficulty surviving in the new environment due to uncommon language between them and the locals, all of which lead to identity shift and social stigma. The medium of instruction has always been a much-debated issue in Pakistan and so it is once again. In MUET too, medium of instruction should be English in order to facilitate the international students who come with minimum or no command on English and soon after their arrival in Pakistan they have problems coping up with. As far as the local students are concerned, teachers may switch to Urdu if need be otherwise continue lecturing in English. No doubt, the local students on the contrary, are also not good at English and need support. The teachers should make sure they cater to the needs of both national and international students. Once, the issue of medium of instruction will be sorted, the students will be at ease. It will give them time to focus on their studies, after that they will gradually learn Urdu which will help them survive and adjust in their new social and academic environment. These students have to invest in learning a new language, improving English, and adapting to the host environment by all means.

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