

Research on Acculturative Stress among International Students in Australian Universities

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Abstract: Acculturative stress among international students in Australia has gained significant attention due to its impact on mental health and performance in their studies. However, there are still gaps in understanding the progression of stress with time, the efficiency of the mechanisms of institutions in Australia, and how effective their support mechanisms are. In this document, the main aim is to analyze the multifaceted causes of acculturative stress, such as language barriers, demands of academia, and social isolation, and look in more depth at the coping strategies used by scholars. Thus, it can be concluded that language and socializing is an important aspect of the students, while education is the major issue faced by them. Furthermore, social support aggravates the feelings of loneliness and does not allow for any further adjustment. According to the research conclusions, the paper recommends that more support should be put in place for scholars from collectivistic cultures through offering better support programs and initiatives that will ensure that the scholars make better social relations, reduce acculturative stress, and enhance their well-being in Australian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Acculturative Stress, International Students, Australia, Language Proficiency, Social Support

1. Introduction

According to Kuo, Acculturative stress is a response to adapting to the indigenous culture. Acculturative stress has been the focus of previous research and has been extensively documented to be the cause and impact of acculturative stress on international students [1]. Upon arrival in a new country, the primary stressors they identify are linguistic, academic, and social isolation [2]. These stressors deny the student the chance to cope and affect his or her mental health and performance in school. For instance, students are restricted in the amount of speaking and comprehending of the surrounding academic practices due to the language barrier and the confusion and frustrations this entails. These stressors are then combined with cultural and interpersonal factors, and social isolation is also added to it. These factors are multiplicative and can greatly harm the students' quality of life.

The process of globalization has led to an increased mobility of scholars from one country to another in the case of tertiary education. For students, this brings about opportunities for both personal and academic growth but also hurdles, with language being the main issue. Scholars with limited proficiency in the country's national language, which in this case is English, face difficulties in communication and integrating into the academic system. These issues further extrapolate the feelings

of isolation and impede success in their educational life. The need for adjusting adds another layer of complexity for the students.

Australia has emerged as a destination for international students and is an ideal case study for this subject. The country is well known for its world-class institutions that attract international students. This is reflected in WorldGrad, where 37% of students looking to study abroad preferred Australia as the destination. The WorldGrad also states that in 2022, the country welcomed 725,000 international students, a massive growth of 570,626 international students in Australia in 2021 [3]. Statistics by Statista show that 40% of students in higher education in the country are from overseas, mainly from Asia and Europe [4]. Department of Education, Australian Government states that the Australian government committed \$2 Bn in research grants to higher education institutions to support research and training, which will further boost immigration by international students [5].

The main aim of this study is to investigate the causes of acculturative stress experienced by international students in Australian universities. It entails studying which linguistic, academic, and social issues students encounter as they adjust to their new environment. The study wants to help understand more about the stressors that cause acculturative stress and their effects on students' well being. Additionally, exploring the coping mechanisms and determining if institutional support reduces acculturative stress. It involves assessing the success of existing programs, i.e., language workshops and peer mentorship, and what action is required to improve where there is none. This, therefore, helps this field by contributing to the literature and giving practical recommendations to improve the academic life of foreign scholars.

2. Causes of Acculturative Stress Among International Students

2.1. Linguistic Barriers

Limited English proficiency is one of the most important causes of acculturative stress experienced by international students. An increasing number of students have English as their second language, not a primary one, and translating academic environments where fluency in English is mandatory to navigate can be daunting. When people feel they cannot understand a lecture, participate in a discussion, or complete an assignment, they become frustrated and feel inadequate. A language barrier hinders academic success significantly because students may fail to keep up with coursework or fully understand a complex academic idea. Limited English proficiency also impacts social interaction [6]. This can make communication with peers complex, casual conversations hard to sustain, and the ability to clearly and socially express yourself, worsening feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The Australian education system has its challenges for students who come to study but are not fluent in English. Australian universities differ from more rigid and traditionally teacher-centered learning environments typical in many countries, emphasizing self-directed learning, inclusion in group discussion, and active participation. This pedagogical approach feels threatening to international students who do not have confidence in their language skills. Still, collaborative projects and peer interactions increase stress on students whose English proficiency is limited. These linguistic challenges indicate the necessity of assistance systems designed to assist students in overcoming the gap and replacing themselves in the Australian academic environment by employing English language workshops and conversational practice programs.

2.2. Academic Demands

Acculturative stress is closely related to academic pressure in Australian tertiary institutions. Students from diverse countries experience a shift in pedagogical approaches, grading systems, and the expectations they set for themselves in their academics. For example, students from some Asian

countries may be used to rote learning and examination-based 'assessment' whilst Australian universities focus on critical thinking, creativity, and independent research. This shift from one's familial work environment to an unfamiliar academic culture can overwhelm the student.

Another layer of stress comes from the evaluation methods used in teaching, including essays and group projects. These evaluation styles are foreign to students with strong end-of-term evaluation structures. The pressure to adapt to this leads to anxiety, more so for those who have the burden of expectations from sponsors and families [7]. The combination of unfamiliar academic practices and high expectations dramatically contributes to the stress experienced by international students in Australian universities.

Language barriers make things worse for students who already face challenges. Limited proficiency in English makes it hard for students to understand instructions and present their ideas clearly and concisely. These interconnected issues show the importance of implementing support systems, such as workshops and mentoring programs.

2.3. Social Isolation and Cultural Differences

Social isolation is one of the essential reasons for acculturative stress that international students experience. Social isolation means that there are no meaningful connections and interactions with peers, which strips them of emotional support. The causes include misunderstanding of culture, language barriers, and different norms. This is a problem that many international students face as they begin new cultures. Sometimes caused by cultural misunderstanding, language barriers, or different social norms, the limited interaction between international and domestic students can be attributed to poor interaction. Domestic students might be unaware of how different the experience is from that of their global peers. Conversely, there may not be a desire to reach out to domestic students for fear of rejection or not feeling good enough. The lack of meaningful interaction can deprive international students of strong social bonds, a key element for emotional support and cultural adjustment.

It is not as if cultural differences do not also transform students' experiences of isolation. As is the case with many international students who find it hard to fit in with the norms and values of the host culture, global (or expat) students tend to feel alienated and robbed of the feeling of belonging. For example, students may find they behave or do something that is considered normal in their home countries but is misunderstood and even dismissed in Australia, leading them to feel out of place [8]. In turn, when students are microaggressed or stereotyped, it exacerbates the social exclusion and leads to the student's passive behavior in interactions with peers and on campus. Most of the time, this results in the students being isolated and adding to their experiences of being in a new environment as aliens.

This is due to factors such as language barriers and a lack of active engagement between local and foreign scholars, among others. These are some of the reasons that make one feel out of place and rejected, and this is why there is a need to promote cross-cultural learning and embrace diversity.

2.4. Institutional and Environmental Factors

International students around the globe face many issues concerning these factors. The lack of comprehensive support systems is a recurring problem, with academic advising and mental health services failing to meet the specific needs of these students. Stigma in mental health awareness and inadequate communication worsens those having these issues.

In Australia, the lack of comprehensive support systems stresses many international students, and institutional support is key to helping international students weather their acculturative challenges. Some institutions offer services such as becoming orientated, getting some advice from someone, or getting some solid support to help one in their class; however, not all these services are available, are

not as sensitive, or do not go far enough when it comes to what international students need. Most of the students do not even know what resources they can use, or they feel too shy to help because of cultural stigmas about mental health or that it will make them look incompetent. Furthermore, international students are underrepresented in institution decision-making, leading to their voices being ignored, so support programs may not adequately respond to their most pressing issues.

Australia's geographical isolation, resource scarcity, and international exposure are also factors that contribute to the psychological stress of students. Australia is very different from those countries in Europe, and North America can encourage students to travel to neighboring 'cultural' or 'academic' countries. In contrast, locations such as Australia can make it more difficult and more expensive to do so. Students might not feel as isolated from the national and global community as they would like. In addition, students in faraway places from their homes or families can feel homesick or lonely because of an absence of them in the proximity to the house [9]. Cutting through these institutional and environmental factors will help reduce acculturative stress and provide an inclusive environment for international students.

By prioritizing these improvements, these tertiary institutions can create an inclusive environment that helps scholars overcome these issues and feel more connected, thus thriving both.

3. Coping Mechanisms and Institutional Support

This section looks at individual strategies for coping and interventions from institutions specific to Australia, such as fostering friendships, joining a group, and developing academic support.

3.1. Individual Coping Mechanisms

Every international student employs individual methods of managing acculturative stress. Other techniques that aim at seeking social relationships, like making friends, joining a support group, staying in touch with the family, etc, also assist in minimizing or reducing the feeling of loneliness. Feeling integrated and part of the community involves being involved in the local community and mimicking their behaviors. The other strategy is to build language through group activities and practices that assist in academic and other social tasks [10]. While the deployment of coping options to worsen stress, like avoiding social contact and provision of counseling within the ethnic groups, leads to an unmanaged mental health issue, there is a need for counseling guiding the proper use of better coping strategies.

3.2. Institutional Interventions

Educational institutions in Australia have programs that can help reduce acculturative stress, such as English language workshops for developing academic and communication skills and academic support services for international students. The student support and buddy schemes, whereby key students are paired with international students, are effective in fostering social intercourse and offering mobility advice. Employees and learners require intercultural training to understand each other since cultural differences may create conflict. Outpatient mental health services also include culturally competent services that provide necessary counseling concerning cultural practices. Altogether, these initiatives are directed to contribute to realizing the support of international students.

The current paper aims to highlight that several universities in Australia have made reasonable efforts in the management of acculturative stress. The University of Melbourne has the 'English for Academic Purposes' that aids the learners in improving on their English proficiency. On the same note, the University of Queensland has "Mates" whose role is to assist the students in finding friends. For example, mental health applications such as My Wellbeing Mate help to deal with stress. Other factors that enhance international students' inclusion are festivals and orientation events, including

cultural events. The above examples demonstrate that because of the richness and versatility of the academic process, it is possible to deal with the problems of international students.

4. Conclusion

The acculturative stress affects Australian international students as it affects their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. In this paper, the complexity of acculturative stress is discussed, and it has been pointed out that language, academic pressure, and lack of companionship are the key sources of stress. The study supports the hypothesis about the relationship between language competence, stress, and social acculturation. Besides, the absence of social support increases feelings of loneliness that make the students struggle in the new environment.

The study also shows that although Australian tertiary institutions have embraced the support of international students, there is a need for more positive and efficient practices. The students require additional support programs, intervention, and social related services, as well as culturally appropriate resources to meet the difficulties they encounter. With the help of such measures, the institutions can effectively contribute to the decrease of acculturative stress, the well-being of the students, and their academic achievement.

To sum up, the problem of acculturative stress needs to be solved with the help of both organizational and practical approaches and personal and communal resources. There is a need for more research in the follow-up studies and tracking the stress in the long-term and the effectiveness of such measures. This is so because it is in the best interest of the international students and the country that Australia should go on to further enhance the welfare of the students and encourage more scholars from all around the globe to come and study in Australia.

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