



Navigating university life in Taiwan: Challenges and coping experiences of international students

Apoorva Saxena *, Sangeeta Chauhan and Michael Tarance Suraj

Department of Education Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar (A Central University) Faculty of Education, Lucknow, India.

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Abstract

Higher education is becoming more international across the world. Many students now travel to other countries for higher studies. Taiwan has become a popular study destination because of its good universities, affordable education, safe environment, and scholarship opportunities. However, international students often face many difficulties while living and studying in a new country. This study explored the experiences of international students studying in Taiwan. It focused on the challenges they faced and the ways they adjusted to university life. The study used a qualitative research approach. A Narrative Inquiry research design was used to understand students' personal experiences. The participants included 10–15 international students from different countries studying in Taiwanese universities. Convenience sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience of studying in Taiwan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that international students faced several challenges. Language and communication problems were common because many local people spoke Mandarin. Students also faced academic difficulties such as different teaching methods, classroom participation, assignments, and research work. Cultural differences, food habits, and limited social interaction made some students feel lonely and isolated. Many students also experienced homesickness, stress, anxiety, and emotional pressure during the adjustment period. Despite these challenges, students used different coping strategies to adjust to university life. Support from friends, roommates, family members, and international student groups helped them emotionally. Participation in campus activities and student clubs also improved their confidence and social connections. The study concluded that international students in Taiwan face many adjustment challenges, but gradually adapt with personal effort, social support, and university assistance. The findings highlight the importance of language support, counselling services, and multicultural activities in helping international students feel comfortable and successful in Taiwanese universities.

Keywords: International Students; Student Adjustment; Cultural Adaptation; Academic Challenges; Taiwan Universities.

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education is a significant phenomenon in the world in the past few decades. As a result, the universities have become more and more convinced that student mobility, interculturalism and international academic cooperation contribute to the improvement of the quality of education and to the competitiveness of the international university landscape. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in the number of students studying in higher education institutions in other countries. International education is not merely for the purpose of enhancing academic growth, but it also helps to build an understanding of other cultures, global citizenship and economic cooperation between countries (peski,2013).

* Corresponding author: Apoorva Saxena

The higher education system, along with the low tuition cost, the technological development, the safe environment, and the scholarship program, has made Taiwan an important destination in Asia for international students. The Ministry of Education of Taiwan has been actively encouraging the internationalization of higher education for years by means of policies, collaborations, and scholarship programs to attract students from various countries. The Taiwan Ministry of Education and Study in Taiwan released statistics that showed the number of international students in Taiwan has steadily risen over the last few years, reaching over 123,000 in 2024 and approaching pre-pandemic numbers.

In addition, Taiwanese universities have also implemented English-medium courses, student exchange programs, and cross-cultural learning environments to promote internationalization efforts (Lan,2022). The multicultural campus phenomenon in Taiwan is now becoming more commonplace; several universities are now home to students with a variety of cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. Educational and cultural exchange programs by the government have also further bolstered Taiwan's reputation as an emerging educational hub in Asia.

Even with all these strides, it can be difficult for international students to adjust to university life in an unfamiliar country. In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), student adaptation, which is viewed as an important factor, has an influence on academic achievement, emotional adjustment, social integration and overall educational experience. International students are likely to encounter a number of changes as they adapt to new academic systems, languages, cultures, and social environments (Baklashov& Kazakov ,2016). When students are successful in adjusting, they can meet their academic objectives and have positive intercultural experiences, but if they are unsuccessful, they may experience stress, dissatisfaction, and problems with learning.

Going to Taiwan to study brings special experiences to the lives of international students, who face cultural differences, language barriers, and new educational expectations. While Taiwan is known for its friendly atmosphere and high educational standards, there are still difficulties that students encounter while pursuing their education. It, therefore, becomes important to understand the lived experiences of international students to enhance the support systems of the institutions and to build inclusive education.

This study is significant because it aims to uncover the lived experience of international students studying in Taiwan and to gain insight into how they experience difficulties related to studying at university. Considering students' experiences could help universities to highlight the key challenges that international students encounter and to design better academic and psychological support as well as social support for students.

2. Review of Literature

Globalization, internationalization of higher education and demand for global educational opportunities have caused an increase in international student mobility in recent decades. Pupils relocate to access good education, enhance employment prospects and taste new cultures. Taiwan's education system is cost-effective, technologically advanced, offers scholarships, and provides a multicultural academic setting, making it an attractive option for international students. But, international students may still encounter multiple adjustment issues upon settling in at the university in Taiwan. Some of these obstacles can be related to academic problems, difficulties with the language, cultural issues, homesickness, emotional stress and social isolation. These experiences have been studied from various angles to understand the adjustment and coping experiences of international students when they move to a foreign education system.

Theories of adjustment by international students are closely linked to theories of acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation. This acculturative stress is the experience of individuals entering a new culture as they attempt to maintain and integrate both their own and the new culture (Berry, 1997). Adaptation will vary with the way people engage with the host society, according to Berry. Likewise, Kim (2001) suggested the Cross Cultural Adaptation Theory explaining that adaptation is a process that is ongoing, consisting of three stages: stress, adjustment, and growth. According to theory, successful adaptation is a result of communication and interaction with the host environment. The U-Curve Adjustment Model by Lysgaard (1955) is another significant theory; it depicts the common process people go through when they settle into a foreign country: excitement, culture shock, adjustment, and adaptation.

There have been a number of studies focused on the adjustment of international students in Taiwan. This is a qualitative study carried out by Wray (2020) applying the U-Curve adjustment model and Psychological Contract Theory to international students' adjustment experiences. The study revealed that there were emotional changes in students at various stages of adaptation. At first, students were thrilled with studying abroad but then they faced stress, loneliness, homesickness and uncertainty. Many students slowly adapted as they interacted with others and received institutional

assistance over time. The study also indicated that students' pre-conceptions prior to their coming to Taiwan had a significant impact on their adjustment experiences.

A problem identified as one of major struggles of international students is their academic adjustment. Stress can occur for students adjusting to a new education system as a result of the differences in classroom participation, language of instruction, grading practice, classroom communication, and teaching methods. International students often struggle academically, according to Andrade (2006) because they are subject to unfamiliar learning environments and language barriers. The challenges students tend to encounter when it comes to independent learning techniques, assignment pressure and communication with professors is a problem.

In the same way, Chou (2019) made a research on the learning experiences of international students in Taiwanese universities and came to a conclusion that language barrier, classroom interaction issues, and academic pressure were some of the key issues that affected the confidence and academic performance of the international students. Mandarin Chinese is still the language of instruction in most classrooms, campus events and administrative communication in many universities in Taiwan, although English-medium programs are available in many universities. This may make it difficult for overseas students to comprehend instructions, engage in discussions, and communicate well with local students and staff.

The language barriers also have an impact on social adjustment and communication experiences of students. Studies on national Chengchi University showed that difficulties in everyday communication, transportation, shopping and social interaction arose due to limited Mandarin proficiency. Students who don't have native language skills may feel cut off from the community and rely on other international students to help them along the way. Communication difficulties can have a negative impact on students' self-confidence and on intercultural interaction.

Another part to international student experience is social and cultural adaptation. The students are faced with differences in social norms, food habits, lifestyles, cultural practices, interpersonal communication styles etc. when entering a foreign country. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) have defined culture shock as a "psychological phenomenon which happens to a person when he or she moves into a culture different from that to which he or she is accustomed. Students may have some initial confusion, discomfort, and loneliness, as they adjust to new cultural expectations.

Lewis, Ching and Su's (2017) qualitative study examined social adaptability issues of international students in Taiwan. Results revealed that the multicultural environment, transportation system, and safety had positive effects on the students' experience in Taiwan. Participants also had challenges with cultural understanding and communication, as well as forming close friendships with local students. The importance of supportive campus environments and opportunities for intercultural interactions to enhance social adaptation and emotional wellbeing were highlighted.

A great deal has been written also about psychological and emotional adjustment. International students may confront stress, anxiety, homesickness and emotional exhaustion due to various factors such as academic pressure, financial burden, cultural differences, and family separation. The level of social connectedness and social support were found to significantly affect IES stress levels by Yeh and Inose (2003). Students who don't have adequate social support have higher levels of emotional problems and loneliness.

Likewise, Sümer, Poyrazli and Grahame (2008) found depression and anxiety to be prevalent psychological issues among international students. Financial stress, discrimination and lack of emotional support were found to be important predictors of psychological distress. In Taiwan, the National Taiwan University Student Counseling Center emphasized the significance of counseling services, orientation programs, and mental health support systems for international students to deal with emotional stress and adjustment issues.

The coping strategies international students adopted for dealing with adjustment problems have also been investigated. Commonly reported coping strategies include peer support, friendship groups, cultural groups, religious groups, and communication with family members. Social media and other online communication tools support students' emotional ties to their families and their friends in their countries of origin. Orientation programmes, counselling services, language support and multicultural activities are also important for universities to offer to support the adjustment process.

Glass, Gómez, and Urzua (2014) conclude that friendships between cultures and involvement in campus activities have positive effects on students' social integration and sense of belonging. The active involvement of students in social and

cultural activities is generally associated with good emotional adjustment and academic satisfaction. The supportive faculty and welcoming campus environments play a large role in positive adaptation experiences as well.

From the literature studied it is clear that international students face various academic, social, cultural, language and psychological issues when adapting to the university environment in Taiwan. The most frequent problems found in the previous studies include language barriers, academic pressure, cultural differences, homesickness, loneliness, and communication barrier. Meanwhile, peer support, counseling services, social networks, and institutional support systems are important in assisting students to manage these challenges.

Objectives and Research Questions

The present study aims to explore the lived experiences of international students studying in Taiwan, with particular focus on the challenges they encounter and the strategies they use to adapt to university life. International students often experience academic, social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic difficulties while adjusting to a new educational environment. Therefore, understanding these experiences is important for improving institutional support systems and promoting student wellbeing in higher education settings.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To explore the challenges faced by international students in Taiwanese universities.
- To understand the coping experiences and adjustment strategies adopted by international students.
- To examine the academic, social, emotional, and cultural experiences of international students studying in Taiwan.

Based on these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What challenges do international students face while studying in Taiwan?
- How do international students cope with academic and cultural adjustment?
- What support systems help international students adapt to university life in Taiwanese universities?

These objectives and research questions guide the study toward developing an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of international students and identifying factors that influence their adjustment and coping processes within Taiwanese higher education institutions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of international students studying in Taiwan. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because it helps in understanding participants' perceptions, emotions, challenges, and coping experiences in depth.

3.2. Research Design

The study employed a Narrative research design, as Narrative Inquiry focuses on exploring individuals' lived experiences and personal meanings with the narrations or stories of the participants. Since the study aimed to understand how international students experience academic, social, cultural, and emotional adjustment in Taiwan, this design was found suitable.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants included 10–15 international students studying in Taiwanese universities. Participants belonged to different countries and academic backgrounds. Convenience sampling technique was used because participants were selected based on their direct experience of studying and adapting to university life in Taiwan.

3.4. Data Collection Tool

Data were collected through a Semi-Structured Interview Schedule consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews provided flexibility for participants to share detailed experiences regarding academic challenges, social interaction,

cultural adaptation, emotional wellbeing, and coping mechanisms. Interviews were conducted online and offline according to participants' convenience.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Before data collection, permission and informed consent were obtained from participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for thematic analysis

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1. Analysis

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed that international students studying in Taiwan experience multiple academic, linguistic, social, cultural, emotional, and psychological challenges while adapting to university life. The findings were organised into five major themes: Language and Communication Barriers, Academic Adjustment Challenges, Cultural Differences and Social Isolation, Emotional and Psychological Experiences, and Coping Strategies and Support Systems. The themes were developed through coding, categorisation, and interpretation of participants' verbatim responses.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Language and Communication Barriers

Table 1 Theme Development for Language and Communication Barriers

Participant Code	Verbatim Responses	Initial Codes	Categories
P1	"I could not understand Mandarin during daily conversations."	Difficulty understanding Mandarin	Language barriers
P2	"Most local students spoke Mandarin, so I felt disconnected."	Feeling disconnected	Social communication barriers
P3	"I was afraid to speak in class because of my English."	Fear of speaking	Classroom communication issues
P4	"Sometimes I could not follow the classroom discussion."	Difficulty following discussion	Academic communication problems
P5	"I struggled to communicate with local students during my first semester."	Communication difficulty	Social interaction problems
P6	"Administrative work was difficult because forms were mostly in Mandarin."	Difficulty in administration	Institutional communication barriers

Language and communication barriers emerged as one of the major challenges experienced by international students studying in Taiwan. Participants reported difficulty understanding Mandarin during daily communication, classroom interaction, and administrative procedures. Communication barriers reduced students' confidence and limited their participation in academic and social activities. Several participants also experienced fear while speaking English in classrooms and group discussions. The findings indicate that language barriers significantly affected academic participation, social integration, and emotional wellbeing among international students.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Academic Adjustment Challenges

Academic adjustment challenges were strongly reflected in participants' responses. Students experienced difficulty adapting to unfamiliar teaching methods, classroom participation requirements, and research expectations. Heavy coursework, assignments, and presentations created additional academic stress. Participants also struggled with group work because of communication barriers and cultural differences. The findings suggest that academic adaptation required both intellectual and cultural adjustment, especially during the initial stage of study in Taiwan.

Table 2 Theme Development for Academic Adjustment Challenges

Participant Code	Verbatim Responses	Initial Codes	Categories
P1	"The teaching style was very different from my home country."	Different teaching style	Educational adjustment
P2	"Professors expected us to participate actively in every class."	Participation expectations	Classroom adjustment
P3	"Assignments and presentations were stressful."	Assignment pressure	Academic workload
P4	"Research work was difficult for me initially."	Difficulty in research	Research expectations
P5	"Managing coursework and cultural adjustment together was exhausting."	Balancing multiple pressures	Academic stress
P7	"Group projects were difficult because of communication problems."	Difficulty in teamwork	Collaborative learning challenges

4.1.3. Theme 3: Cultural Differences and Social Isolation

Table 3 Theme Development for Cultural Differences and Social Isolation

Participant Code	Verbatim Responses	Initial Codes	Categories
P1	"I missed the food from my home country."	Food adjustment difficulty	Cultural adjustment
P2	"The lifestyle here was very different from my culture."	Lifestyle difference	Cultural differences
P3	"It was difficult to make local friends."	Friendship difficulty	Social isolation
P4	"Sometimes I felt excluded in social gatherings."	Feeling excluded	Social adjustment problems
P5	"Local students were polite, but communication was limited."	Limited interaction	Friendship barriers
P8	"I felt lonely because I did not have close friends initially."	Loneliness	Social isolation

Participants experienced various cultural and social adjustment difficulties while studying in Taiwan. Food habits, cultural practices, communication styles, and lifestyle differences created cultural shock during the early stages of adaptation. Several students found it difficult to establish close friendships with local students because of communication barriers and limited interaction. Feelings of loneliness and exclusion were also evident in participants' experiences. The findings indicate that social integration remained a major challenge for many international students despite studying in multicultural university environments.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Emotional and Psychological Experiences

Emotional and psychological challenges were common among international students during the adjustment process. Participants experienced homesickness, loneliness, anxiety, emotional stress, and mental exhaustion while adapting to unfamiliar academic and cultural environments. Academic pressure and separation from family further increased emotional distress. The findings suggest that emotional wellbeing is closely connected with students' academic performance, social adjustment, and overall university experiences.

Table 4 Theme Development for Emotional and Psychological Experiences

Participant Code	Verbatim Responses	Initial Codes	Categories
P1	"I often felt lonely during festivals."	Loneliness	Emotional distress
P2	"I missed my family very much."	Homesickness	Emotional challenges
P3	"Academic pressure made me anxious."	Academic anxiety	Psychological stress
P4	"Everything felt unfamiliar in the beginning."	Adjustment stress	Emotional adjustment
P5	"Sometimes I cried because I felt emotionally overwhelmed."	Emotional exhaustion	Psychological distress
P8	"There were times when I felt mentally exhausted."	Mental fatigue	Psychological wellbeing concerns

4.1.5. Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Support Systems

Table 5 Theme Development for Coping Strategies and Support Systems

Participant Code	Verbatim Responses	Initial Codes	Categories
P1	"Talking to my family every day helped me."	Family communication	Emotional support
P2	"International student groups supported me emotionally."	Peer support	Social support systems
P3	"Campus activities helped me make friends."	Participation in activities	Social engagement
P4	"University counseling services were helpful."	Counseling support	Institutional support
P5	"My roommates helped me understand Taiwanese culture."	Support from roommates	Cultural learning support
P7	"Joining student clubs improved my confidence."	Club participation	Social confidence building

Despite facing numerous challenges, participants adopted several coping strategies that helped them adjust to university life in Taiwan. Peer support, student communities, family communication, and participation in campus activities played important roles in reducing stress and loneliness. University counseling services and supportive teachers also contributed positively to students' emotional and academic adjustment. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support systems and social networks in promoting successful adaptation among international students.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that international students studying in Taiwan experience various academic, linguistic, cultural, social, emotional, and psychological challenges while adapting to university life. These findings are strongly supported by earlier studies and theories related to international student adjustment, acculturation, and cross-cultural adaptation.

Language and communication barriers emerged as one of the most significant challenges experienced by participants in the present study. Students reported difficulties understanding and communicating in Mandarin Chinese during classroom discussions, daily interactions, and administrative procedures. These communication barriers often reduced students' classroom participation, confidence, and social interaction with local students. Similar findings were reported by Chou (2019), who found that language difficulties significantly affect academic participation and adjustment among international students in Taiwanese universities. The findings are also consistent with the study conducted by Yeh and

Inose (2003), which reported that limited language proficiency increases acculturative stress and negatively affects social connectedness among international students. Previous literature indicates that language barriers not only influence academic performance but also contribute to feelings of isolation and reduced self-confidence.

Academic adjustment challenges identified in the present study are also supported by earlier research. Participants experienced difficulties adapting to unfamiliar teaching methods, classroom expectations, independent learning systems, assignment pressure, and research-oriented academic practices. These findings align with the work of Andrade (2006), who reported that international students often struggle with differences in educational systems, communication styles, and academic expectations in foreign universities. Similarly, Chou (2019) found that assignment stress, active classroom participation, and communication difficulties are major academic concerns among international students studying in Taiwan. The findings further support the theoretical explanation of cross-cultural adaptation proposed by Kim (2001), which explains that adaptation to a new educational and cultural environment is a gradual process involving stress, learning, and adjustment.

The present study additionally revealed that cultural differences and social isolation significantly influenced students' adjustment experiences. Participants reported difficulties adjusting to food habits, lifestyle differences, communication patterns, and establishing friendships with local students. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Lewis, Ching, and Su (2017), which found that although Taiwan offers a welcoming and multicultural environment, international students still experience challenges related to intercultural communication and social integration. Similarly, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) explained that culture shock commonly occurs when individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural norms, behaviours, and lifestyles. The findings of the present study further support Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which suggests that difficulties in balancing one's original cultural identity with adaptation to the host culture may create stress and adjustment problems.

Emotional and psychological challenges such as homesickness, loneliness, stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion were strongly reflected in participants' responses. Students reported missing their families, feeling emotionally isolated, and experiencing stress due to academic and social pressures. These findings are supported by Sümer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008), who identified depression and anxiety as common psychological problems among international students. Similarly, Yeh and Inose (2003) reported that low social support and communication difficulties significantly increase emotional stress among international students. The findings are also consistent with reports published by the National Taiwan University Student Counseling Center, which emphasized that homesickness, emotional distress, and adjustment anxiety are common experiences among international students living away from familiar social and cultural environments.

The findings of the present study further demonstrated that coping strategies and institutional support systems play an important role in helping international students adjust successfully. Participants highlighted the importance of peer support, communication with family members, counseling services, student organizations, and participation in campus activities in reducing stress and improving adaptation experiences. These findings align with the study conducted by Lewis, Ching, and Su (2017), which emphasized that supportive campus environments, social networks, and intercultural interaction opportunities positively influence international students' adjustment experiences. Similarly, Glass, Gómez, and Urzua (2014) found that intercultural friendships and recreational involvement significantly improve students' sense of belonging and social integration within university environments.

Overall, the findings of the present study strongly support previous research on international student adjustment and adaptation while also providing deeper qualitative insight into the lived experiences of international students studying in Taiwan. The study confirms that academic, linguistic, cultural, social, and emotional challenges are interconnected aspects of international student life. At the same time, the findings highlight the significant role of social support systems, peer interaction, and institutional assistance in helping students successfully navigate university life in Taiwan.

6. Conclusion

The present study explored the lived experiences of international students studying in Taiwan with particular focus on the challenges they encountered and the coping strategies they adopted while adjusting to university life. The findings revealed that international students experience multiple linguistic, academic, cultural, social, emotional, and psychological challenges during their adaptation process.

Language and communication barriers emerged as one of the most significant difficulties faced by students. Limited understanding of Mandarin and communication problems affected classroom participation, social interaction, and

administrative adjustment. Academic challenges such as unfamiliar teaching methods, assignment pressure, classroom participation expectations, and research requirements also created stress among participants. In addition, students experienced cultural differences related to food habits, lifestyle patterns, and social behavior, which contributed to feelings of isolation and difficulty forming close friendships with local students.

The study further revealed that homesickness, loneliness, anxiety, and emotional stress were common psychological experiences among international students during the early stages of adjustment. However, despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience and adaptability through various coping strategies and support mechanisms. Peer support, family communication, participation in campus activities, student communities, and university counseling services played important roles in helping students manage stress and improve their adjustment experiences.

The findings highlight the importance of strong institutional support systems in promoting the wellbeing and successful integration of international students in higher education institutions. Universities should provide effective orientation programs, language assistance, counseling services, multicultural activities, and student engagement opportunities to support international students academically and emotionally.

Overall, the study concludes that although international students face several adjustment difficulties while studying in Taiwan, they gradually develop coping abilities and resilience through social support, personal adaptation, and institutional assistance. The study contributes to qualitative research on international student experiences by providing deeper understanding of students' lived realities, emotional experiences, and adjustment processes within Taiwanese university environments.

Recommendations

- Universities should strengthen language support programs for international students.
- Counseling and mental health services should be made more accessible and culturally inclusive.
- Universities should organize multicultural activities to encourage interaction between local and international students.
- Peer mentoring and student support groups should be promoted to reduce social isolation.
- Future researchers may conduct comparative or mixed-method studies involving larger samples of international students.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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