

Adapting to a New Environment: Mental Health Challenges Among South Asian International Students in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The mental health of international students has become a pressing global concern, with significant implications for academic success and overall well-being. This qualitative study explores the mental health challenges faced by international students at Khulna University, Bangladesh, focusing on stressors, coping strategies, and institutional support. Using in-depth interviews, fourteen purposively sampled students were engaged until data saturation was reached. Thematic analysis conducted with NVivo 14 revealed multiple challenges, including academic pressure, language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, and limited access to mental health resources. Personal and social issues, such as isolation from family and changes in food habits, further intensified psychological stress. Despite these difficulties, students reported effective coping mechanisms, including leisure activities, supportive peer relationships, and regular communication with family. Participants also emphasized the importance of institutional support, particularly accessible mental health services and motivational interactions with faculty, in fostering resilience and well-being. The findings underscore the need for universities to design tailored interventions and holistic support systems that address the unique challenges of international students. Future research should examine the perspectives of policymakers in international offices to identify service gaps and improve communication between institutions and international students.

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Introduction

The mental health of international university students is increasingly becoming a global concern (Macaskill, 2013; Storrie et al., 2010). In this regard, Eisenberg et al. (2009) revealed that university students, especially international ones, are a high-risk population for

psychological distress and mental disorders, positioning this issue as a public health concern. Similarly, Bayram and Bilgel (2008) found that mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and stress are common among international students and are growing in number and severity.

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Moreover, this increase is partly due to the numerous transitions and life adjustments these students undergo (Ansari Lari et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, Mamun et al. (2019) found that over half of university students experience depression, while 58.0% face anxiety. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2025) reported that 28.0% of students in public universities suffer from psychological distress. Additionally, Mori (2000) identified that international students face distinctive stressors related to acculturation, including language barriers, academic expectations, and social isolation.

Another important dimension is loneliness and isolation, which also heighten the vulnerability of international students to depression (Nilsson et al., 2004; Yi et al., 2003). For instance, Hyun et al. (2007) found that transitioning to US universities presents additional challenges, including financial hardship, academic adjustment difficulties, and social isolation. In line with this, Bayram and Bilgel (2008) argued that educational and social demands are significant stressors for international students as they transition into university life. Additionally, Saeed et al. (2018) and Taneja et al. (2018) revealed that the university environment can overwhelm students lacking psychological resilience. Moreover, Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) highlighted that academic stressors, low social support, and relationship issues are significant risk factors influencing the mental health of college students. Notably, a study of 33,512 participants in the US revealed that over 48% reported difficulty managing academic stressors, which contributed to the development of mental health disorders.

Given these challenges, Mori (2000) and Zhai et al. (2025) emphasized that institutional and social support systems are critical in improving international students' mental health. In particular, peer support networks are particularly valuable, as students often rely on their peers for information and guidance (Rai, 2002). Furthermore, Hyun et al. (2007) found that students with strong advisor relationships were less likely to report emotional stress or use counseling services.

Turning to the Bangladeshi context, Hasnat (2017) reports that over 100 universities in Bangladesh host approximately 3,500 international students annually, primarily from India, Nepal, Bhutan, and African countries. However, public universities host the largest number of these students but face housing shortages and gaps in academic sessions. Similarly, Han et al. (2013) and Lian and Wallace (2020) revealed that Chinese international students (CISs) in the U.S. experience high levels of depression and anxiety, with 45.0% reporting symptoms of depression and 29.0% experiencing anxiety. On the other hand, Hyun et al. (2007) found no significant differences in emotional stress between international and domestic students,

suggesting widespread mental health challenges across demographics.

Expanding the global perspective, Marginson et al. (2010) found that in 2012 Australia hosted 402,388 international students, primarily from China, India, and Malaysia. In this context, these students faced various socioeconomic and cultural challenges as they adapted to a new environment, often without familial support. Moreover, Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) observed that international students frequently encounter discriminatory attitudes, further complicating their adjustment. Based on the above discussion, the first aim of this study was to identify the stressors and challenges international students face that impact their mental health. Secondly, the aim is to explore the coping mechanisms used by international students to improve their mental health problems and stressors. Finally, the third aim was to investigate the effectiveness of mental health support services and resources available for international students.

Despite extensive global research on the mental health of international students, most studies are concentrated in Western contexts, with limited attention to developing countries like Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, existing research primarily focuses on general student populations, leaving the specific experiences of international students largely unexplored. Moreover, prior studies often rely on quantitative approaches and lack in-depth qualitative insights into students' lived experiences, coping strategies, and adaptation processes. There is also insufficient understanding of the effectiveness of institutional mental health support systems within Bangladeshi universities. In particular, no comprehensive study has been conducted on international students at Khulna University.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative, context-specific exploration of mental health challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems among international students at Khulna University. In other words, it is guided by three central research questions. First, it seeks to identify the primary sources of stress and anxiety experienced by international students at Khulna University. Second, it explores the coping mechanisms these students prefer when facing academic or personal challenges. Finally, it examines the mental health services currently available to international students at Khulna University, as well as the types of support they expect from the institution.

Literature Review

Academic, Cultural, and Acculturative Stressors

Hamamura and Laird (2014), in their study conducted in the U.S., showed that East Asian students often face more significant mental health challenges than their domestic peers, mainly due to difficulties in the acculturation process. The study highlights that language barriers, difficulties in adjustment, lack of social support and friendships, and unfamiliarity with institutional systems are significant contributors to elevated depression risks. The researchers further observed that East Asian students often experience heightened psychological stress due to internalized and often unattainable expectations, as well as perceived familial pressure.

Similar patterns are identified by Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) and Poyrazli (2015), who also emphasize academic pressure and lack of social support as key stressors, indicating a strong consistency across studies regarding major sources of distress. However, the extent of these challenges varies across contexts. For instance, Hyun et al. (2007) found no significant differences in stress levels between international and domestic students, suggesting that acculturative stress may not be universally higher among international students. This variation highlights the importance of contextual and institutional factors in shaping student experiences.

Prevalence of Mental Health Problems

According to the American College Health Association (2020), 37.0% of college students in the U.S. reported experiencing intense anxiety within the previous 12 months, while approximately one-third experienced severe depression that affected their functioning. Additionally, 9.0% of respondents reported having attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime. These findings reinforce the severity and widespread nature of mental health challenges among university students. However, such large-scale studies are predominantly conducted in Western contexts, which limits their generalizability to countries like Bangladesh. Furthermore, while these statistics provide a broad overview, they do not capture the nuanced and context-specific experiences of international students, particularly those navigating cultural transitions.

Risk Factors Influencing Mental Health

Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) identified several key risk factors affecting student mental health, including academic stress, relationship difficulties, low social support, and experiences of sexual assault. Their large-scale study revealed that over 48% of participants struggled with managing academic stress, contributing to mental health

issues. These findings are consistent with other studies (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Poyrazli, 2015), which also highlight academic and social pressures as central contributors to psychological distress. However, most of these studies rely heavily on quantitative approaches, which may not fully capture the ways these stressors are experienced across diverse socio-cultural contexts. This indicates a methodological limitation in the literature, particularly in its ability to understand the depth and complexity of international students' lived experiences.

Student Concerns and Psychological Symptoms

Poyrazli (2015) found that international students primarily experience concerns about academic performance, career prospects, and stress management, with additional challenges, such as marital issues among married students. While these findings align with broader research emphasizing academic and personal stressors, they are based on a relatively small, localized sample, limiting their generalizability. Moreover, the study does not fully explore how these concerns may differ across cultural or institutional contexts, highlighting the need for more diverse and context-sensitive research.

Comparative Mental Health Outcomes

Hyun et al. (2007) conducted an online survey involving 3,121 students, including 551 international students, and found no significant differences in emotional distress between international and domestic students. A second study conducted in a community college in Southern California also reported similar findings. In contrast, Han et al. (2013) reported significantly higher rates of depression (45.0%) and anxiety (29.0%) among Chinese international students compared to general population averages. This contrast suggests that mental health outcomes among international students are not uniform and may vary depending on cultural background, institutional environment, and available support systems. While some studies indicate heightened vulnerability, others suggest comparable levels of distress, pointing to inconsistencies in the literature.

Group-specific Psychological Challenges

Han et al. (2013) examined psychological symptoms among Chinese international students and found elevated levels of depression and anxiety compared to national averages. However, this study focuses on a specific ethnic group within a particular institutional context, which limits its generalizability. It also does not sufficiently address coping strategies or institutional support mechanisms, indicating a gap in understanding

how students manage these psychological challenges in different environments.

Socio-cultural and Environmental Challenges

Forbes-Hewett and Sawyer (2016) found that international students often face academic and social pressures as they adapt to unfamiliar cultural and political environments. Many students encounter discrimination, negative societal attitudes, and challenges related to identity and belonging. These findings extend beyond individual stressors to highlight broader socio-cultural influences. Compared to studies conducted in the U.S. (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), which emphasize psychological and academic stressors, this study underscores the importance of environmental and societal factors. Such differences suggest that the nature of challenges faced by international students is highly context-dependent.

Materials and Methods

Research design

The prime focus of this study was to investigate the factors influencing the mental health of international students at Khulna University in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was used to facilitate our understanding of the rational foundations of mental health issues. Unlike quantitative methods, which primarily focus on numerical data, qualitative research seeks to understand the underlying meanings and contexts of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The primary data collection method for this study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with international students at the university. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in questioning, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant themes while maintaining a consistent framework for all participants (Kothari, 2004). Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and focused on topics such as participants' primary sources of stress or anxiety, preferred coping mechanisms, and the sort of mental health services they received from Khulna University. A total of 14 participants were interviewed, ensuring a diverse range of insights.

Participants

The target group of the research was international students of Khulna University. Some specific criteria were followed when recruiting the foreign student participants: (1) the participant must be an international student, (2) enrolled in a regular educational program. Furthermore, data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, involving a total of 14 key informants. As reaching data saturation is a methodological

goal that signifies the depth and sufficiency of the information gathered. Data saturation is the point in a research process where enough data has been collected to draw necessary conclusions, and any further data collection will not produce value-added (Nasrin et al., 2023).

Interview Outline

We designed a semi-structured interview schedule to gather information. The interview schedule was broken down into two parts. Interviews were difficult because international students did not agree to be interviewed without the hall administration's permission. The hall administration's approval was taken with the assistance of the supervisor. Later, after signing the consent form, the international students were interviewed. All the participants were initially questioned about factors that affect their mental health. In addition, questions about coping mechanisms when they feel mental stress, the cultural adaptation process, environment and accommodation arrangements, and professional mental health support of Khulna University were asked.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following the completion of the interviews, we transcribed them all. NVivo 14 software was installed to classify and categorize the transcribed data into themes. After specifying the goals and parameters of our analysis in a new NVivo project, we imported the participants' demographic data and the interview transcripts into it. Then, significant information or codes were extracted from each semi-structured interview. Later, based on some significant information or codes, clusters were created. An example of the cluster is given below. Managing academic pressure is a theme comprising the codes of academic pressure, the complex admission process, and the exam load. Similarly, tackling unfamiliar environments involves significant information or codes, including accommodation problems, weather diversity, Lack of sleep, and new places. In this way, we have decided on themes based on the codes. However, themes were determined using cluster analysis. Finally, the results were analyzed by theme.

Ethical Clearance

This study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Khulna University Research and Innovation Center (reference number: KUECC-2024-12-103). Informed consent was secured from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. All data were collected

and used solely for academic purposes, ensuring strict confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of 14 undergraduate participants. The majority are male (10 of 14), aged 20 to 24 years. Most participants are in their second or third year of study,

representing a variety of disciplines including electronics and communication engineering (ECE), computer science & engineering (CSE), Pharmacy, Architecture, and other specialized fields. In terms of monthly family income, participants are fairly distributed between those earning above and below 50,000, with a few reporting alternative income descriptions.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Program	Year	Discipline	Monthly Family Income
P1	24	Male	Undergrad	Third	ECE	>50k
P2	22	Male	Undergrad	Second	Pharmacy	<50k
P3	21	Male	Undergrad	Second	CSE	<50k
P4	23	Male	Undergrad	Third	Architecture	>50k
P5	24	Male	Undergrad	Third	BGE	>50k
P6	20	Male	Undergrad	Second	CSE	>50k
P7	23	Female	Undergrad	Third	AT	<50k
P8	20	Female	Undergrad	First	Pharmacy	>50k
P9	23	Female	Undergrad	Third	AT	<50k
P10	22	Female	Undergrad	Second	Pharmacy	>50k
P11	21	Male	Undergrad	First	ECE	<50k
P12	21	Male	Undergrad	First	CSE	More than lacks
P13	21	Male	Undergrad	Second	FWT	<50k
P14	23	Male	Undergrad	Third	AT	<50k

Note: AT = Agrotechnology, BGE = Biotechnology & Genetic Engineering, CSE = Computer Science & Engineering, ECE = Electronics and Communication Engineering

Thematic Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the field data yielded nine significant themes related to international students' experiences such as Excessive academic stress, Tackling in unfamiliar environments, Challenges in the Foreign Academic Landscape, Challenges in personal and social spheres, Ensuring a supportive framework for mental health, The university fosters support and inspiration, Leisure engagements for well-being, Friendly peers support for mitigating mental stress, Influencing motivational factors for supporting mental health. These themes capture the major academic, social, environmental, and psychological factors influencing their mental health and adaptation.

Theme One: Excessive academic stress

Excessive academic stress emerged as a prominent theme, encompassing academic pressure, a complex admission process, and heavy exam loads. The qualitative data revealed that 10 participants experienced academic pressure. Most participants reported that frequent class tests, attendance requirements, viva sessions, continuous assessments, and examinations created significant pressure. They

also indicated that missing any assessment negatively affects academic performance.

Participant 10, a female respondent, described her experience: *"My major stress when I first arrived was academic. I did not understand so much Bangla before. Sometimes, the sirs used to shift to English, but it was difficult for us to understand. I used to go to learn from a friend, but they were not so fluent in English either."*

Although two participants reported no academic stress, one mentioned the complexity of the admission process, while another highlighted exam-related pressure as a source of mental strain. Some participants further emphasized that frequent class tests (e.g., 3-4 per week) contributed to ongoing mental pressure.

Theme Two: Tackling in unfamiliar environments

This theme includes challenges related to accommodation, cultural adaptation, sleep disruption, unfamiliar surroundings, separation from family, and climatic differences. While 12 participants reported cultural adaptation issues, only one participant explicitly mentioned unfamiliar places, separation from family, and weather differences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Word Cloud on Tackling in Unfamiliar Environments



Source: NVivo 14.

Cultural adaptation was the most frequently reported challenge. Participants perceived significant cultural differences between their home country and Bangladesh. Initially, they had difficulty adjusting but gradually adapted and came to appreciate the local culture.

Participant 10 explained: *"I faced the cultural barrier. I do not know what the culture is like here. If something had happened, I would have wondered why this would not have happened in Nepal. Then my friends told me this is because of the culture here. I felt more pressure with clothing than food. Cultural programs: I did not know what was happening, but now I slowly understand."*

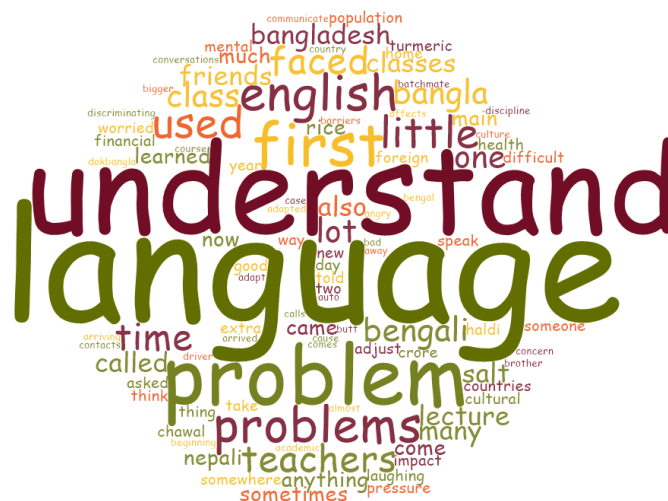
Accommodation-related issues were the second most common concern. Participants reported problems such as a lack of privacy, poor waste management, noise pollution, water shortages, and overcrowded living conditions.

Participant 11 stated: *"There are a little less hall facilities here. Dustbin management is not good. The room sweeps, not wipes. The water is not good here. We have to buy water. Besides, it is not easy to have four people in one room. There is much noise; privacy is lost. It would have been great to have two people in 1 room."*

Theme Three: Challenges in the Foreign Academic Landscape

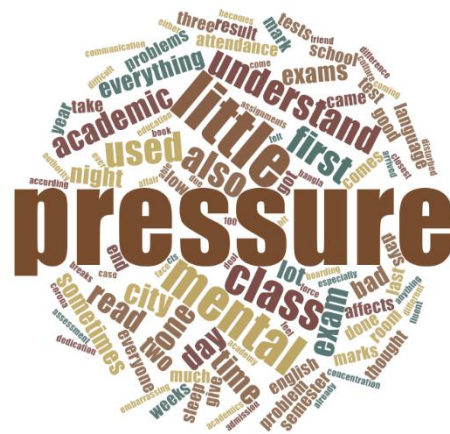
This theme encompasses financial difficulties, overpopulation, identity as an international student, and language barriers. Language emerged as a central issue affecting communication and academic performance. Participants emphasized that without language proficiency, effective participation in academic and daily activities becomes difficult (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Word Cloud on Challenges in the Foreign Academic Landscape



Source: NVivo 14.

Figure 4: Word Cloud on Ensuring a Supportive Framework for Mental Health



Source: NVivo 14.

Theme Six: The University fosters support and inspiration

Participants acknowledged the university's role in providing institutional and interpersonal support. Although only five participants explicitly mentioned this theme, they identified university mechanisms such as international student cells and supportive faculty members. One participant noted the international office's role in assisting students with admissions and other administrative processes. Additionally, several participants emphasized that teachers act as motivators and provide academic and emotional support.

Participant 7 stated: "Our teachers are the kind of motivator. They tell us to do this, do that. That is how he is motivated. No teacher demotivates. There is much competition, and we can reach our goals due to our competence. I took it positively."

Theme Seven: Leisure engagements for well-being

Participants reported engaging in various leisure activities as coping mechanisms to maintain mental well-being. These included browsing the internet, listening to music, playing sports, practicing religion, reading books, and watching movies (see Figure 5).

Out of 14 participants, 13 discussed leisure activities that contribute to relaxation and stress reduction. One participant specifically emphasized religious practice as a key source of mental peace. Most participants highlighted sports and movies as common leisure activities that help alleviate stress.

Participant 4 shared: "I like sports. I used to play football and cricket. I go to the field and see what kind of sports are going on. I was the manager of football and cricket. I used to manage everything."

Participant 11 added: "Leisure time improves mental health. We live in the attic. I roam here and there; I watch movies. So there is no mental pressure."

Figure 5: Word Cloud on Leisure Engagements for Well-being



Source: NVivo 14.

foster a sense of belonging, which is particularly important in an unfamiliar cultural environment. This finding aligns with earlier research (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), which underscores the protective role of social support in mitigating psychological distress.

Compared with the literature, the findings suggest that while the types of coping mechanisms are broadly similar across contexts, their importance may be heightened in environments with limited formal institutional support. In such cases, students rely more heavily on informal and peer-based strategies. This reflects a form of adaptive resilience, where students actively construct their own support systems in the absence of structured services.

Mental Health Services Received and Expected (RQ3)

The findings reveal a noticeable gap between the mental health services currently available to international students and their expectations. While some level of support exists through teachers and international student advisors, these services are largely informal and not professionally structured. Teachers often act as motivators and provide basic emotional support; however, they are not trained mental health professionals, which limits the scope and effectiveness of their support. Participants expressed a clear need for more formalized mental health services, such as dedicated counseling centers or mental health cells within the university. This expectation reflects a growing awareness among students about the importance of professional psychological support. Similar concerns are noted in the literature, where the lack of accessible and structured mental health services is identified as a major limitation, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Existing research also highlights that institutional support systems play a crucial role in reducing student stress and improving well-being (Ginter & Glauser, 1997). However, much of this research is based in Western settings, where counseling services are more established. The findings of this study suggest that such structured support systems remain underdeveloped at Khulna University, creating a gap between student needs and institutional capacity.

Limitations

The study is limited to international students from Nepal and India, which restricts generalizability. The use of in-depth interviews has some limitations, including potential bias from the researcher's perspective, limited generalizability of the findings, and potential for social desirability bias from participants. The researcher will employ

reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process to mitigate these limitations.

Conclusion

International students at Khulna University, Bangladesh, deal with various challenges that affect their mental well-being. These challenges include academic pressures, language barriers, heavy workloads, and complex admission processes. Additionally, issues such as adjusting to a new culture, accommodation problems, and navigating a foreign academic system contribute to the stress experienced by these students. Challenges in personal and social aspects, like communication problems, relationship issues, and cultural differences, also play a role in their overall mental health. Despite these challenges, the study identifies significant sources of support and coping mechanisms. Leisure engagements and friendly peer support are impactful strategies for mitigating mental stress. Engagement in sports, entertainment, and social interactions provides avenues for relaxation and connection.

Additionally, family communication, self-motivation, and involvement in club activities contribute positively to participants' mental health. The study advocates for a proactive approach to fostering a conducive environment for mental well-being. Recommendations include establishing specialized mental health cells, comprehensive facilities, and targeted interventions to address language barriers and academic stressors. Recognizing the importance of leisure engagements, peer support, and family communication, universities can play a transformative role in enhancing the holistic well-being of international students. Mental health is becoming a growing problem throughout the world.

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