Impact of Religious Beliefs and Social Support on Acculturative Stress: A Case Of International Students In United Kingdom

Muhammad Waseem[1]*, Masoom Ahmed[2], Muneeb Tariq Abbasi[1]

[1]Brooks Resource Academy, London, U.K.
[2]University of West Scotland.

ABSTRACT

Stress within international students is certainly a matter of concern in recent years with a common increase in international educational exposure among students. In past the number of pupils moving abroad to study were far lower and due to recent dynamics, there is a need to investigate the aspect that trigger stress in them. The aim of this study was to determine the influence made by religious beliefs and social status on the acculturative stress, which is a crucial fact to be revealed due to its entanglement with mental health of international students. Data was gathered through a survey based on close-ended questionnaire. Analysis was conducted by using regression analysis and both the predictors were found to have significant and positive effect on the acculturative stress of international students. Findings of this study are immensely applicative for the policy makers and strategists and they further open ways for future researchers which are revealed in the paper.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The term “stress” can be traced back as early as 14th century, where it was referred to express hardship, affliction, strait and adversity. There have been various developments in evolution of this term and its meanings. The time period which is considered to be the most vital in its conceptualisation is World War 2 and Korean War (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Stress became a legitimate topic in academia in 1950s (Dewe, O'Driscoll, & Cooper, 2010). Stress either referred as stimulus (by focusing on events within the environment) or response (a reaction in medical sciences), is always recognised as an inevitable human functioning which requires attention and being cope (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Stress is regarded as a negative emotional behavioural as well as a physiological process that transpires when a person makes attempt to adjust or deal with stressors. While, stressors are circumstances, that disrupt, day to day functioning and drive the person to make adjustments (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Fritz et al, 2008). Although, stress causes both positive and negative influences, negative influences of stress are however much known, it also causes positive influences in the form of improved performance (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003).

Whenever the stress is being discussed within the context of academic industry, the mental health of student is often discussed. Landow, (2006) related these two notions by considering that stress is the antecedent of mental health issues among young adults. At the time of defining stress within student, there are various authors that have attempted to define the notion (Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003; Rice et al, 2016; Richardson, Abraham & Bond, 2012). It is however claimed that stressors alone do not produce anxiety, depression or tensions, rather interaction between stressors and the person’s perception and the reaction to these stressors cause stress.

As per the recent statistics, total numbers of higher education students in the UK is reported to around 1,901,300 out of which 506,480 are international students (IIE, 2018). Highest numbers of international students are originated from China and there is also a consistent increase in these figures. UK is a highly diversified country with a very suitable set of mix where representatives of hundreds of foreign countries are found in abundance (Hunt, Layton & Prince, 2015). Despite that, often cases are reported where international students are reported to

*Address correspondence to this author
Email: mwaseem@bracademy.co.uk

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have psychosocial as well as non-psychosocial challenges (Brunsting, Zachry & Takeuchi, 2018).

Most reported psychosocial factors are acculturative stress, lack of belongingness and depression (Kim & Ra, 2015; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Van Horne et al, 2018). When it comes to non-psychosocial issues common factors are suicide ideation (Servaty-Seib et al, 2016), academic achievement and academic integration (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Lowinger et al, 2016).

United Kingdom is considered to be one of the most lucrative countries for the international students; this is mainly due to the English language, which is considered to be the priority of most of the students (Lashari et al, 2018). In recent years other English-speaking countries have shown a massive increase in international student enrolment (ICEF, 2019), which is also claimed to be a shift due to strict UK immigration policies for student stay after completion of their studies. The policies however have improved in the favour of students' substantial, by re-introduction of two-year post study work visa after graduation (Adams, 2020).

The aim of this study is to determine the influence made by religious beliefs and social status on the acculturative stress, which is a crucial fact to be revealed within the context of mental health related aspects of international students. Findings of this study are expected to contribute in a significant amount both theoretically as well as there are going to be inherent practical implications associated to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The study conducted by Khawaja and Dempsey, (2008) has revealed that self-perceptions and expectations imposed by university environment influences adjustment of the international students. Hull, (1978) argues that various academic issues and concerns related to studies are more relevant for international students, hence become greater source of stress related mental health problems, when compared with other issues related to cultural skills required to adjust in environment of host culture (Yasuda & Duan, 2002).

Academic stress is a common phenomenon faced by students, studying nationally and internationally. Yet, international students face more academic challenges when compared with student studying and residing in their homeland, this is mainly due to difference in curriculum, learning styles and teaching methodologies (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Irizarry, & Marlowe, 2010).

International students experience greater level of academic stress due to frustrations delays, failure, lack of resources, and feelings of being socially outcasts, competition, tasks, deadlines, responsibilities and workload. Stress is also a result of wide range of changes, such as instant changes, disruption in life or goals (Misra et al, 2003).

Acculturative Stress

Studies that are conducted in the context of acculturation stress and adjustments of international students have mostly opted for the application of instrumental theory (Stress and coping theory). SCT explains the ways in which individuals cope and adapt in a different environment with unfamiliar culture (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). SCT defines psychological stress as a relationship between individuals and environment, which is evaluated by when it exceeds their resources and endangers their wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Acculturative stress is an immensely discussed phenomenon in the context of international studies. Berry, (2005) defines it as a stressed reaction which is in response to life events that are based on acculturation experience.

International students are well aware that after graduating from their respective programs, they will head back home (BBC News, 2020); hence stress experienced due to acculturation is assumed to be temporary. This enables students to compartmentalise their acculturation by limiting their interactions with home country as much as possible. It is however likely that stress experienced due to acculturation is less momentous than for the immigrants who are exposed with new environment in longer term (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007).

Religious Beliefs

A very important aspect discussed in the context of acculturative stress is religion; Gardner, Krägeloh, and Henning (2014) have found that religion (spirituality) might act as a as coping mechanism against acculturation stress

and perceived stress among international students. Although, when behaviour of Muslim international students was examined, usage of religious coping strategies decreased over time, this was due to adaption of newer environment.

H1: *There is a significant impact of religious beliefs on stress among international students*

Social Support

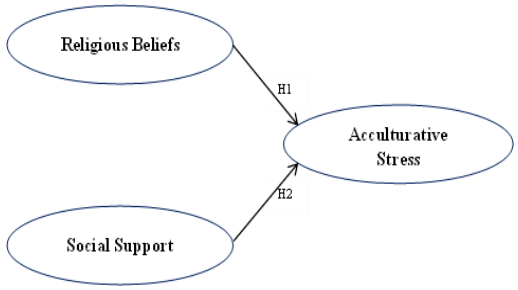
Social support is a phenomenon considered to be advantageous by many authors (Misra et al, 2003; Poyrazli et al, 2004). Social support is defined as esteem, perceived comfort, helping, and caring an individual can have from others (Cobb, 1976). These others are often family member, but peers, work colleagues and members of community are also important providers of social support.

As per the findings of Neri and Ville (2008), 25.8% of international students consider that family support is substantially important for the academic success. Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, (2002) revealed that lower levels of social support is reported within international students when compared with local students; this is due to the fact that local students lived near their close relatives. Poyrazli et al, (2004) have revealed that married students are reported to have higher levels of social support when compared with singles.

Praharso, Tear, and Cruwys (2017) also argued that when individuals are far from their support system, effectiveness of social support is likely going to be limited; it becomes more vital when they are involved in life transition phase such as completion of their studies abroad. Quality of the support also matters, in some occasions there is support provided but it is not effective due to the quality. Good quality of social support alleviates any stress or strain within international students at the time of their transition in host cultures (Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002). Investigation performed by Mallinckrodt and Leong, (1992) discussed various sources of social support among international students, and results of the study have shown that positive relationships with teachers is highly beneficial for male students. On the other hand, when it comes to female students, tangible support, and good relationship with other students, and flexibility of curriculum were found to be beneficial. On the basis of the above discussion, following hypotheses are being proposed;

H2: *There is a significant impact of social support on stress among international students*

Proposed Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH GAP AND CONTRIBUTION

After reviewing various past studies and developing an in-depth understanding regarding the phenomenon it is found that there is room of more scholarly investigations. At the present there is no such investigation performed in United Kingdom with updated facts and findings which is crucial due to the recent global environment change, caused by pandemic. This therefore creates a gap within the literature.

Successful completion of this study will contribute in the literature of SCT and this study will make attempt to inculcate some useful updated findings into the classical findings of Lazarus and Folkman, (1984). A well-designed and resourceful investigation in the context is going to contribute substantially; this is being stated by keeping the lucrative nature of the industry into account.

Theoretically this study contributes to theory of stress management, this will be done by considering the academic stress into account. This will be done by inclusion of dimensions introduced by classical body of knowledge (Cooper et al, 2001; Cooper & Dewe, 2008), these were however more concerned about stress when the recipients were employees rather than students.

METHODOLOGY

After a thorough and careful review of wide range of studies based on quantitative (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Szabo et al, 2016) and qualitative (Richardson et al, 2012; Brunsting

et al, 2018) approaches, this study is applying quantitative approach in this study. The decision is made after considering the overall all scope and aim of the study into account.

In order to get hold of data, survey is conducted by utilising questionnaire (items provided in appendix) based on close-ended method. Respondents of the study are individuals who are either currently enrolled in UK as international students or have been UK based international students in past. Selecting a suitable sample size is however very important hence, inference made by Wolf, Harrington, Clark, and Miller, (2013) has provided with a range of suitable sample size, which is 30 to 460 cases.

It is important to gather suitable sample which is a true representative of the population. In this study a sample of 97 respondents was initially collected. The survey was collected online as well as in hardcopy format. Due to the pandemic collecting data solely in the form of hardcopy was very challenging. The usable responses in the end were 83 out of which 57 were males and 26 females.

Most of the participants in the study were currently or previously enrolled international students enrolled in higher education institutions in London. The selection of the particular region is based on the fact that it is the most ethnically diversified region of England (GovUK, 2018).

The analysis of quantitative data will be performed by using regression analysis, the software used was SPSS. Application of regression analysis was based on its capacity to estimate the relationships between a dependent variable (acculturative stress) and one or more independent variables (social support and religious beliefs).

ANALYSIS

It is vital to analyse the data gathered through application of suitable methods to get best out of the gathered knowledge.

In this study the number of usable responses were 83, out pf which 68.7% were males and 31.3% were females.

Descriptive

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	57	68.7
Female	26	31.3
Total	83	100.0

Reliabilities

Measure used to gauge the reliability of the data was Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's Alpha also known as coefficient alpha was developed by Lee Cronbach in 1951. It is a very effective source to measure reliability or internal consistency of the data. Cronbach's alpha tells if the test designed is accurately measuring the variable of interest (Chan & Idris, 2017).

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Religious Beliefs	10	0.753
Social Support	6	0.862
Acculturative Stress	25	0.909

Cronbach's alpha for religious belief, social support and acculturative stress is higher than 0.7 which implies that the data is consistent and reliable. It further implies that the data has a tendency to meet its purpose.

Regression

In order to gauge the proposed impacts of social support and religious belief on acculturative stress, regression analysis is performed. Regression analysis is a statistical process to estimate the relationships between an outcome (acculturative stress) and predictors (social support and religious belief).

Variables	β	t	Sig
(Constant)	.412	1.881	.064
Religious beliefs	.959	5.180	.000
Social Support	.224	2.432	.017
R		0.670	
R Square		0.449	

In the table above the findings of regression analysis are demonstrated. R value provided above is the correlation between the predicted values and observed values of the outcome. While the R square is the proportion of variation in the outcome variable that has been explained by the model. R and R square of this model shows moderate correlation between the variables is 0.67 and 0.449 which is suitable yet not categorised as a strong one. It is also not low as any value below 0.4 is considered to be low.

Coming to the p-value (sig) and t-value, p-value to exhibit significant relation should be less than 0.05. for both the predictors, p-value is below 0.05 which shows a significant

relationship between predictors and outcome variable. The findings are further confirmed through t-values. T-value should be more than 2 to prove a significant relationship and this is one again proved in the above table.

Beta Coefficient for religious belief is 0.959, this implies that one-unit increase in religious beliefs will cause 0.959-unit increase in acculturative stress. Likewise, one-unit increase in social support will cause 0.224-unit increase acculturative stress. Although, both the predictors are having significant and positive influence on acculturative stress, but out of the two, influence made by religious belief is far more intense when compared with the influence of social support.

CONCLUSION

The study attempted to examine the effect of religious belief and social support on acculturative stress among international students in United Kingdom. Findings of the study have revealed that both the hypothesised relations are proven to be true.

It can be concluded therefore that there is influence of religious belief and social support on acculturative stress. Managing the level of stress among the international students is certainly the key, and factors that are influencing it are certainly important for the strategy developers who are interested in outcomes. Stress among international students is important for countries like UK where educational activities generate huge amount of financial inflows. Findings of this study are therefore very important at the time of developing strategies, especially after occurrence of highly impactful international events such as recent pandemic, which is certainly causing a lot of stress related aspects within individuals.

Future Recommendation

In future, studies should investigate the phenomenon even further by introducing the element of academic performance. Stress is certainly going to affect the academic performance of the student, exploration in that regard is therefore eminent and has a capacity to bring lot more insights to the phenomenon.

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