RESEARCH ARTICLE
Health Psychology

International Students' Sociocultural Adaptation Experiences: Their Perceived Stress and Coping Strategies *

Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Sosyokültürel Adaptasyon Deneyimleri: Algılanan Stresleri ve Başa Çıkma Stratejileri

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study is to highlight the relationship between sociocultural adaptation, perceived stress, and the coping strategies employed by international students to maintain their psychological well-being. Studying abroad can be exciting opportunity to gain new experiences, exploring diverse cultures, and establishing global connections. However, after moving abroad international students frequently face with challenges like language barrier, cultural differences, social isolation, and building relationships (Wilson, 2013) . Sociocultural variations across countries can influence the communication skills, norms, and beliefs. Moreover, poor adaptation process has been associated with variety of psychological and physiological disorders that affect overall well-being (Waqas et al., 2015, Schönfeld et al., 2016). Coping strategies can play a significant role in this process, preventing psychosomatic symptoms and psychological disorders. In current study, eight participants were recruited from various universities in the United Kingdom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and reflexive thematic analysis were employed to analyse the obtained data. It is found that although international students come with different expectations, the majority of them tried to avoid language barrier as they had prior knowledge of English. Seeking social support from close friends and family was the most commonly utilised technique both to avoid stressful situations and as coping strategies. Participants' resilience was also increased throughout their adaptation journey. Given the small number of participants, further studies are required to investigate the impact of coping strategies and stress on sociocultural adaptation process.

Keywords: Stress, International, Sociocultural, Well-being, Coping

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, sosyo-kültürel adaptasyon, algılanan stres ve uluslararası öğrencilerin psikolojik esenliklerini korumak için kullandıkları başa çıkma stratejileri arasındaki ilişkiyi vurgulamaktır. Yurt dışında eğitim almak, yeni deneyimler kazanmak, farklı kültürleri keşfetmek ve küresel bağlantılar kurmak için heyecan verici bir fırsat olabilir. Ancak, yurt dışına taşındıktan sonra uluslararası öğrenciler sıklıkla dil engeli, kültürel farklılıklar, sosyal izolasyon ve ilişki kurma gibi zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır (Wilson, 2013). Ülkeler arasında sosyo-kültürel farklılıklar iletişim becerilerini, normları ve inançları etkileyebilir. Üstelik, zayıf adaptasyon süreci genel sağlığı etkileyen çeşitli psikolojik ve fizyolojik rahatsızlıklarla ilişkilendirilmiştir (Waqas ve diğ., 2015, Schönfeld ve diğ., 2016). Başa çıkma stratejileri bu süreçte psikosomatik semptomları ve psikolojik rahatsızlıkları önlemek için önemli bir rol oynayabilir. Mevcut çalışmada, Birleşik Krallık'taki çeşitli üniversitelerden sekiz katılımcı ile röportaj yapıldı. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapıldı ve elde edilen verileri analiz etmek için refleksif tematik analiz kullanıldı. Uluslararası öğrenciler farklı beklentilerle gelmelerine rağmen, çoğunluğunun İngilizce'nin önceden bilgisi olduğu için dil engelinden kaçınmaya çalıştıkları tespit edildi. Yakın arkadaşlardan ve aileden sosyal destek aramak, hem stresli durumlardan kaçınmak hem de başa çıkma stratejileri olarak en sık kullanılan teknikti. Katılımcıların direnci de adaptasyon süreçleri boyunca arttığı belirtildi. Katılımcı sayısının az olması nedeniyle, başa çıkma stratejilerinin ve stresin sosyo-kültürel adaptasyon süreci üzerindeki etkisini araştırmak için daha fazla çalışmaya ihtiyaç vardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stres, Uluslararası, Sosyokültürel, Esenlik, Başa Çıkma

Gokhan Pinarbasi [1]

INTRODUCTION

Globalization can be described as the process of growing interdependence and integration among countries, societies, and cultures (Gebregergis et al., 2020). It became trend in various dimensions such as politics, technological, organizations, companies, and universities (Haugton & Schödl, 2020). In the recent decades, students started to move for getting higher education across various countries, and this trend emphasizes that international students are the important part of the higher education worldwide (Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013). According to HESA (2023), 45% of the postgraduate students (372,500) were international in the United Kingdom in 2022 and has grown from 35% in 2018. There might be several reasons to go to a different country to complete studies such as domestic facilities, language, and the academic superiority of the host country (Andrade, 2006; Ke et al., 2022). Moreover, studying abroad can be perceived as a valuable and exciting experience for students to explore new cultures, gain different perspectives, and

---

* This study is author's master's degree dissertation, titled ''International students' sociocultural adaptation experiences: Their perceived stress and coping strategies.''
[1] Health Psychologist, England, United Kingdom

broaden their vision. Additionally, they are likely to have new connections all over the world. Hence, going to abroad can increase the independence and responsibility both professionally and personally, as students' academic environments, friendships, and living arrangements change (Pittman & Richmond, 2007).

However, this phenomenon can bring a multitude of sociocultural challenges that international students confront as they begin their educational journeys in unfamiliar environment and culture (Aldwin & Stokols, 1988; GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017). Several studies revealed that international students face significant challenges related to sociocultural adaptation which can be a stressful process (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Wilson, 2013; Garcia, 2015; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Researchers highlighted the variables that affects the adaptation process, such as language proficiency, education level, prior sociocultural experiences, length of the stay, social interactions, and academic performance (Rosenthal et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the process of adapting to a new environment and a cultural setting entails navigating through various stressors, which requires international students to employ effective coping strategies to manage the perceived stress and stress-inducing factors. Also, studies have indicated that international students might be susceptible to develop psychological problems because of the adjustment and the stress (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, it was found that poor adaptation can increase the risk of suffering mental disorders that are often associated with the levels of stress (Bhugra, 2004; Caplan, 2007).

Students struggle with academic demands and financial pressures; however, international students may face extra non-academic demands like, adapting to the culture, environment, people, language, loneliness, racial discrimination, confusion, and sense of loss (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Moreover, they need to build new social relationships in unfamiliar cultural context. These may involve stressful experiences potentially causing a harm to students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and as well as physical health (Chou et al., 2011; Waqas et al., 2015, Schönfeld et al., 2016). Due to these challenges, it is indicated that international students experience double adaptation to the new culture of a country they move to, and to the culture of a university (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). Additionally, the interplay between stress and vulnerability was considered as the underlying factors influencing psychosomatic symptoms and psychological disorders (Fischer et al., 2021). Individuals may develop coping skills to effectively facilitate socio-cultural adaptations and manage perceived stress. Researchers stated that adaptive coping skills were found to be helpful to decrease sociocultural adaptation stress, as well as increasing subjective health (Schneiderman et al., 2005; Rhein, 2018). As a result, students may enhance their overall well-being.

Society and Sociocultural Adaptation

It is not possible to think of a society without a culture. Society can be defined as a collective entity that helps individuals to shape their behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, and expectations (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014). When international students engage in adapting to a new culture, social relations, structures, and dynamics might affect their experiences and perspectives within the host society and culture.

Culture has been found to have profound impact on adapting a new culture and establishing social relationships, as it affects the communication competency and proficiency (Furukowa 1997; Greenland & Brown, 2005). Culture comprises a complex framework of shared values, norms, beliefs, behaviours, and symbols within a particular social group, influencing people's attitudes, perceptions, and engagement in social interactions. As individuals commence the journey of adapting to a new culture, they inevitably encounter diverse cultural disparities like social customs, etiquettes, feeling of complete helplessness, and communication styles that require in-depth understanding and acceptance (Dorozkhin & Mazitova, 2008). Thus, international students need to modify their behaviours and cognitions in accordance with the cultural context to prevent any negative behavioural and physical outcomes (Aldwin & Stokols, 1988; Triandis, 2006). Nevertheless, the ability to adapt the changes and embrace the differences in culture relies on demonstrating social integration, being open to new experiences, willing to learn and fill the cultural gaps, appreciating and respecting cultural practices and norms of the society. Thereby, international students may effectively navigate the socio-cultural interactions, and foster meaningful relationships by developing capacity to meaningfully interact with local people.

Furthermore, socio-cultural adaptation is an important process which involves adjustment to a new cultural context, social norms and values, language, and social practices and dynamics of the new environment (Kim, 2001; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011, as cited in Haugton & Schödl, 2020). It can be defined as a holistic process that encompasses individuals' approaches to addressing routine problems in various domains such as family life, work, and school, and is linked with the psychological outcomes in the unfamiliar environment (Berry, 1997). It may consist of various complex and multifaceted processes like behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Adapting to a new culture and society brings some difficulties like making friends, finding a job, learning a new language which might cause lot of pressure (Wang et al., 2021). Through this phase, individuals may experience identity negotiation, homesickness, and establishing social relations in an unfamiliar environment by trying to reconcile their own cultural backgrounds (Kim, 2001). This is also a part of acculturation, which means striking a balance between maintaining own culture and adopted new culture of the host country (Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). Both the sociocultural adaptation and

acculturation are processes that international students experience when they are in unfamiliar cultural context in the host country. However, acculturation mainly refers to psychological and behavioural changes, whereas sociocultural adaptation refers broader scope, including new social environment and its values, norms, dynamic, and culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). They are interconnected processes, effective sociocultural adaptation requires implementation of successful acculturation, or vice versa (Rosenthal et al., 2008). The consequences arising from sociocultural adaptation might significantly influence the individuals' physical well-being and mental health (Razgulin et al., 2023). Studies have indicated that poor sociocultural adaptation leads higher anxiety, lower well-being, and worse psychosomatic symptoms like hypertension, general fatigue, and migraine (Jiang et al., 2003; An & Chiang, 2015; Razgulin et al., 2023). Besides, it is found that among different psychological disorders, depression and anxiety has highest prevalence among international students across different countries, such as Türkiye (62%), US (45%), Kazakhstan (33%), where they even attempt suicide (An & Chiang, 2015; Razgulin et al., 2023).

Stress and Coping Strategies

The globalization, rapid acceleration of technology, the use of the World Wide Web and social media have been found to increase the stress levels of individuals (Fischer et al., 2021). The expanded and the holistic definition of stress is that the inability to cope with a *perceived* (real or imagined) threat to one's mental, physical, and emotional, well-being, which results in a series of physiological responses and psychological adaptations to their surroundings (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Vazquez et al., 2009; Wang, et al., 2021). Psychological stress can be defined as state of anxiety that arises when the demands of events and responsibilities are perceived as exceeded one's ability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), whereas physiological stress refers to the body's response to demands or overwhelming stimuli that is interconnected with inflammatory and physical diseases (Selye, 1956). Stress leads to allostatic load that entails the body's attempt to adapt to repeated or prolonged stressors, which can lead to disrupt homeostatic processes such as changes in heart rate and blood pressures, decreased cortisol, and changes in immune function (McEwen, 1998). Researchers suggested that there is an interaction between stress and well-being, and stress has both direct and indirect link to physical impacts and the psychological well-being of people (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). As stress entails a transaction between an individual and their environment, individuals' perception could play a dominant role through the stressors, which is any real or imagined situation, circumstance, or stimulus that is perceived to be a threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When the stress response was first recognized, much attention was given to the physical aspects of the dynamics involved with fight-or-flight, specifically the symptoms of stress (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Numerous studies also highlighted that stress may contribute to the maladaptive health attitudes and lifestyle behaviours, particularly developing eating disorders and associated behaviours and attitudes (Keyes et al., 2011; Klatzkin et al., 2018, Kouvonen et al., 2005).

International students' sociocultural adaptation process has been found significantly associated with higher stress levels in different studies (Araiza & Kutugata, 2013; Deuchar, 2022) highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing the sociocultural adaptation process of international students. Sociocultural adaptation is a complex and potentially stressful process, so that emotional resilience, coping mechanisms, and flexibility might play a key role in adaptation and psychological well-being (Luthans et al., 2015). Coping strategies and skills emerge as a crucial factor for international students to deal with the stressful situations. Folkman et al. (1986) defined *coping* as a process of managing both internal and external where cognitive and behavioural effort is required. There are different coping strategies stated such as problem and emotional focused coping, approach and avoidant coping, active and passive coping (Diaz-Guerro, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Holahan et al., 1996, as cited in Tuna, 2003). It was found that international students utilise most often religion, family, and friend support as coping techniques (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006). Even though numerous findings highlighted the correlation between coping skills and adaptation, other studies argue that the relationship between specific coping skills and outcomes related to adaptation remains unclear (Arthur, 1998; Pritchard et al., 2007). However, it is indicated that adaptive coping skills increases resiliency and overall well-being, while preventing dysfunctional and psychopathologic consequences (Bektaş, 2004; Priebe et al., 2014).

Taken collectively, cultural distance, sociocultural adaptation, perceived stress, and coping skills emerge as a combination of factors that predict and shape the adaptation process of international students and influence their well-being. Furthermore, it is important to explore the relationships among these aspects.

The purpose of the current study is to explore international students' experiences of stress and coping strategies while on sociocultural adaptation process to a new country and a culture. The following research questions were developed:

1. How do international students adapt to the changes in lifestyle and beliefs in a foreign country?

2. What coping strategies did international students utilise through the process of stress management?

3. How resilient do international students think they are to deal with pressure and setbacks?

METHODS

Methodological Approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study. A qualitative approach was considered more relevant to undertake this research as it allowed a greater capacity to gain in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the individuals' perspectives and experiences using their own words (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Bektaş, 2004; Clark, 2005). It allows for exploring and understanding the complex phenomena from a subjective perspective of the individuals (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As a specific qualitative method, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was applied to analyse the collected data. Moreover, thematic analysis is defined as ''a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data'' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). In RTA, researchers engage in reflective approach, considering their own biases, interpretations, and assumptions throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used. It is commonly used in qualitative research to select participants that hold substantial information, allowing researcher to use limited resources with great efficiency (Patton, 2014). The study recruited eight students across the UK, between the ages 21 and 29. The inclusion criteria were for participants to be either undergraduate or postgraduate student in the UK, being maximum of 30 years old, living in abroad for the first time as an international student, moving abroad alone, and coming from Balkan countries, Türkiye, or Cyprus. The age restriction provides a more coherent group, as perceptions or the approach of the people might differ after a certain age. Despite each country has distinct culture, norms, and beliefs, the research focused on Balkan countries as they have shared history before, leading mutual influence.

Table 1: *Demographic variables of the participants*

Participants	Sex	Age	Country of origin	Degree level	Length of living in the UK
1	Female	25	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	7 months
2	Male	29	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	9 months
3	Male	23	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	9 months
4	Female	28	Cyprus	Postgraduate (Taught)	8 months
5	Female	26	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	7 months
6	Female	24	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	7 months
7	Female	23	Türkiye	Postgraduate (Taught)	9 months
8	Female	22	Cyprus	Postgraduate (Taught)	9 months

Source: Participant data from interview

Participants were recruited from different universities in the UK through social media advertisement. None were excluded, and no participants withdrew from the study. All the participants were doing a postgraduate taught programme.

Procedure

Data collection process took place between March 2023 and May 2023. Online data collection method was chosen as it is easy to arrange at any time, cost-effective, and timesaving. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, then transcribed verbatim. The interviews were held in English. All participants were contacted through email by including the details of the research. It was not necessary for participants to use their cameras. Each participant was presented a similar set of open-ended questions relating to their expectations, experiences, stress responses, and coping skills. This allowed participants to reflect on their experiences, thoughts, and feelings widely, and provided detailed information (Sarantakos, 1998).

The interview schedule was structured into the following five sections:

1. Participants' expectations and vision about the UK

2. Cultural and educational differences/similarities

3. Their challenging and stressful experiences

4. Coping strategies

5. Their thoughts about their overall development

As the challenging and stressful situations can be an overly sensitive subject for some participants, the researcher tried to balance the between questions during interview.

Basic demographic questions such as age, gender, their country of origin, degree level, and length of living in the UK were also included. A pilot interview with an international postgraduate taught student was carried out to resolve any difficulties with the wording of the questions and the structure, as well as to identify any questions that might make a

participant feel uncomfortable. However, the data collected from pilot interview was not included in the subsequent analysis.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected to carry out this study. Semi-structured interviews give a scope for participants to answer questions more on their own words and understanding compared to standardised structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They allowed participants a place to reflect on their experiences with more flexibility, and thereby, capacity to elicit more in-depth information from the participants' experiences. Also, it is indicated that interviews gives some freedom and flexibility to researcher to delve deeper and explore additional questions (Bryman , 2004).

Relevant actions were taken to ensure the reliability of the data, namely pilot testing and transcription accuracy. Through pilot testing, potential ambiguities were identified, and efforts were made to avoid misinterpretation, ensuring accuracy and details in transcription accuracy. Yet, the interaction may differ between the interviewer and the participant, since each individual is unique, and quality of the responses are significantly different in each interview (Kumar, 2005). Moreover, the quality of the data is also depending on the interviewer's commitment to the interview and the experience (Kumar, 2005), while research bias could be potential influence.

Data Analysis

Once the data was transcribed and anonymized, then it was coded, analysed, and interpreted. Transcription of the data helps researcher to familiarise with the data by taking notes and listening repeatedly. As an analytic procedure, thematic analysis was applied which is the most common approaches to analysing qualitative data. Specifically, reflexive thematic analysis was used as it offers researcher a range of choices and options to make while analysing data (Campbell et al., 2021). Selective coding of the transcription was the first step. After this process, themes were generated. They are not exact words or phrases, but rather implications inferred from words, behaviours, and events (Terry et al., 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), themes capture important information related to research questions. To narrow down the themes, codes were systematically refined, and themes were changed as deemed necessary.

Ethics

Qualitative research can be perceived as more intrusive compared to quantitative research due to its focus on people's experiences and emotions (Dornyei, 2007). Consequently, ethical considerations were considered at early stages of the study. Firstly, ethical approval was obtained from Bournemouth University (Ethics ID 47565). Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study and handed Participant Information Sheet and Participant Debrief Sheet providing an overview of the study aims and procedure, and explaining that participation is anonymous and entirely voluntary. They were granted the right to withdraw from the study without a reason, at any time until the completion of the transcription process. Participant Agreement Form was sent and signed by the participants and the researcher. Furthermore, participants were assured that their personal information and the collected data would be anonymised, treated as confidential, stored securely, and would solely be used for the specific purposes of the current study. Participants were labelled numbers to protect their privacy and anonymity.

RESULTS

The result section presents participants' experiences and feelings about being international students as they navigate the challenges of sociocultural adaptation. The participants were living in the UK for a duration of around eight months, where they discussed and reflected on their experiences within that period. The analysis of the collected data revealed four distinct key themes and several codes related to participants' experiences and perception of sociocultural adaptation. All of the themes also have their own subthemes. Themes presented in this section covers international students' own descriptions regarding the expectations and motivations affecting decision to pursuing international education in the UK, the challenges they faced during social adjustment process, their perceived stress and corresponding coping strategies, and their perception of personal and professional growth.
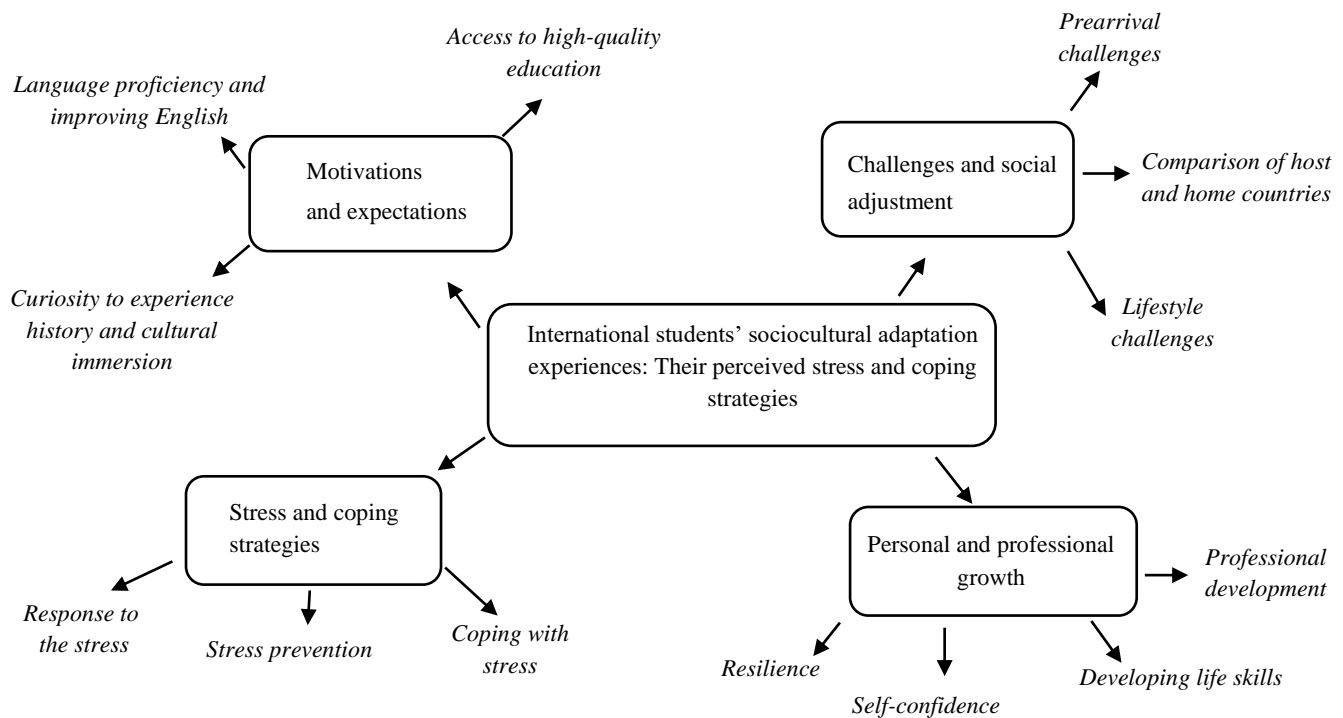
Figure 1: *Thematic Map for Themes and Subthemes*
Source: Generated by the author
Note. The comprehensive view of the themes, subthemes, codes, and their respective definitions can be found on Appendix A.

Theme 1: Motivations and expectations

Whether it is pursuit of new study experience or other reasons to go abroad, people might have personal motivations and expectations for their journey. Within this theme, underlying motivations and expectations that drove international students to study in the United Kingdom were discussed. Diverse range of motivations as subtheme led international students to pursue their education in the UK, such as *access to high-quality education*, *language proficiency and improving English*, and *curiosity to experience the history and culture.*

Subtheme 1: Access to high-quality education. Participants indicated they chose UK due to its most prestigious academic quality. For example,

'' I chose to study in the UK due to variety reasons like education system, and they are recognized and respected globally. I didn't want to experience anything about accreditation and related things. (Participant 8).''

'' UK was my first option because of its reputation for high-quality education, diverse range of universities and programs.. (Participant 3).''

Subtheme 2: Language proficiency and improving English. According to the participants' responses, the ability to speak effectively in English was the most important motivation for nearly all of them. They indicated a desire to improve their existing English skills or expressed an avoidance to learn a new language in another country. Even though United Kingdom is not the only country that English language spoken, one participant stated their preference in the following manner:

'' I chose England, because America is very far away, and the master's education is 2 years. You know, as far why I didn't choose other European countries as I can say that the reason is to improve my language… (Participant 6).''

'' I chose to study in the UK because the language. I did not want to learn a new language in Europe (Participant 7).''

Subtheme 3: Curiosity to experience history and cultural immersion. Participants reported their prearrival expectations associated with the vision of the UK. One of the notable expectations expressed by the participants was experiencing historical landmarks and the modernity of the UK. One of the participant communicated their expectations as follows:

''I was thinking about the UK as a place of rich history, royalty, and tradition. Also the unique blend of history, culture, and modernity. I was excited about experiencing… (Participant 3).''

By exploring the motivations and expectations of international students, this theme offers significant insights into their mindset and the influential factors that shape their sociocultural experiences. All of the participants were aware of the fact that knowing the local language makes easier to adapt socially and academically.

Theme 2: Challenges and social adjustment

In this theme, the various obstacles and difficulties were delved into adaptation process that international students face in a foreign cultural, social, and academic environment. Three subthemes were developed: *prearrival challenges, comparison of host and home countries,* and *lifestyle challenges.* Also, within the subthemes, any cultural, educational, and social differences were discussed.

Subtheme 1: Prearrival challenges. Some of the participants mentioned a challenge they encountered even before coming to the UK, which is visa process. As one of them stated in the following viewpoint:

''.. you have to through a lot of documentations and process. The visa process is something else like Europeans do not experience. I'm not sure that European people would understand entirely that the pain we are going through to get a visa.'' (Participant 1)

Subtheme 2: Comparison of host and home countries. Several participants indicated there are no similarities between their home country and the UK in terms of culture, education, cuisine, which influence their adaptation process, and potentially their overall well-being, as participants explained:

'' *I can't say that we are very similar. Culturally, this country is more like an individual society than my country.''* *(Participant 6)*

'' *Definitely not. People in Cyprus care about hospitality and generosity, but in the UK, they are so different.''* *(Participant 4)*

Regarding to educational system differences, all of the students reported that it is completely different compared to their home country's education system. To exemplify, one of the participants stated that:

'' *... we have lots of midterms, quizzes, and finals in Turkish system compared to the UK. But they only have assignments in my department. This is also like creates academic adjustment problems.''* *(Participant 4)*

The participants reported both similarity and difference in terms of cuisine that led them to have both positive and negative feelings, which potentially impact on their well-being and subjective health in the long term:

''The only similar thing with Turks is the conception of tea. They drink a lot like us, it is really funny to have it with my flatmate. She has it white, and I drink as black.'' (Participant 5)

'' When I saw baked beans, I felt so excited because I thought it would be the same as in Turkey, but it was sweet! Now, I became one of them and eating 55p pizza nearly every day. I really miss our food.'' (Participant 2)

Subtheme 3: Lifestyle challenges. It is found that socialising in the host country poses a big challenge for international students. This challenge emerged from two factors: nature of social occasions and their closing times, and the local people's mindset. It clearly shows that the international students had to change their lifestyles compared to the one they had in their home country. Two participants explained this problem by providing insights into their experiences as follows:

'' But, to me, it's just a small village because I am a big city girl. It is really difficult to find something to do when compared to my country.'' (Participant 5)

'' It is really difficult to be in a same energy with people you are not familiar culturally. In Turkey, I think we are more developed in sense of humour, fashion, perspectives between most of the university students. But in here, they are like child, they are thinking like they have nothing to do.'' (Participant 8)

Furthermore, all of the participants stated the challenges they have faced influenced their adaptation period to the new country. It indicates how these challenges affect social interactions, and the sense of belonging to host country.

Theme 3: Stress and coping strategies

This theme centres on how students manage stressful situations in their new environment, how stress is experienced, and what kind of coping strategies they employed to manage the stressors. Three subthemes emerged from this theme, namely *response to the stress*, *stress prevention*, and *dealing with challenges.* Even though the participants stated they have experience either emotional or physical reactions to the stress, the close friends were viewed as helpful for stress prevention and dealing with challenges. It highlights how international students keep their close friends in their home country so close instead of building new relations in the host country.

Subtheme 1: Response to the stress. Participants indicated various negative emotional responses to the stressful situations:

'' I became very angry. I got triggered easily. I don't want to talk with anyone when I am stressed. I just focus on the thing I feel stressed.'' (Participant 8)

''I am trying to stay home and try to avoid everything. This is a bad thing. This, this might be a bad thing, but, but I'm trying to suppress my emotions, and I'm trying to think. I try to stay calm.'' (Participant 5)

However, some participants indicated that they experience some somatic responses, as follows:

'' I don't have specific responds behaviourally, but my body does. I observe some changes on my body like acne on my face, acne like red dots near my mouth. When I see them, I feel like the situation I am in is so bad.'' (Participant 2)

Subtheme 2: Stress prevention. However, in order to prevent stressful situations, the majority of the participants explained that they tend to get support from old friends in their home country. Further, engaging with hobbies, yoga, and meditation were also found most commonly utilised technique to prevent stress. As stated by several participants:

'' I like to go for a walk, and listen to some good music, especially Britney Spears.'' (Participant 5)

'' By talking people I know so close. My best friends are the ones who support me. Also, engaging in physical activities such as yoga, or meditation help me to reduce my stress levels.'' (Participant 7)

Subtheme 3: Coping with stress. The students reported a range of coping strategies they employed both during stressful situations and prevent stress. One of the participants was avoidant rather employing adaptive coping skills. This might create other health problems like internet addiction, or weight gain/loss, backache, and carpal tunnel syndrome. It is stated as:

''I play video games. I kinda run away from the situations. It's easier for me to focus my game and satisfy myself by winning.'' (Participant 2)

For others, among the identified coping strategies, one of the most frequent coping strategy was social support from friends in home country. This could indicate the sense of belonging, or the importance of shared culture and values. Some of the participants explained as following:

''So, I facetime with my different friends or my friend groups in Cyprus, like, I can say nearly every day.'' (Participant 4)

'' I can say with the support of my friends from Turkey.'' (Participant 5)

One of the participant stated that during their adaptation process seeking a psychologist/psychotherapist was helpful, and this support was beneficial to develop some strategies to feel less stressed:

'' I have started receiving therapy here, it is also helpful for me at the time. I can learn how to, you know, react to my emotions, and then move on.'' (Participant 1)

Theme 4: Personal and professional growth

The last theme of the current study is personal and professional growth which consists of four subthemes as *resilience, self-confidence, developing life skills,* and *professional development.* Almost all participants agreed that moving to another country to pursue education can significantly help individuals' personal growth and professional development. The most frequently and consistently reported perceived personal changes was being self-sufficient.

Subtheme 1: Resilience. It was found that resiliency of the participants increased due to the social and cultural setbacks they have experienced. This might also affect their overall well-being positively, the participants stated as:

'' Definitely yes. It is really a different and difficult experience everyone should experience once in their lifetime to be more resilient for the difficulties in life.'' (Participant 7)

'' You need to learn to do everything alone at first. So that's why you become more resilient I guess.'' (Participant 8)

Subtheme 2: Self-confidence. After careful consideration the subtle overlap between the concept of resilience, self-confidence was emerged as the second subtheme. Although some participants mixed the meanings of these, this subtheme highlights how to development of self-confidence played a pivotal role by believing their own capabilities after experiencing socio-cultural difficulties and loneliness in a different country. Some of the participants stated how they fostered an empowered and strong sense of self:

'' I think I learnt how to stand on my feet as a strong woman. I learnt that I am enough, I can easily say to myself.'' (Participant 5)

'' I can truly say, I can do anything by myself, that's fine. I think I gained some self-assurance or confidence.'' (Participant 4)

Subtheme 3: Developing life skills. Another noteworthy subtheme discussed personal perspective under domestic responsibilities. The participants indicated the awareness of living alone made them to engage in the household

chores. Some of the participants reflected their perspective on overall responsibilities of maintaining a home and living alone, as following:

''...not living as the princess of her mothers and father's house anymore, and doing my own work, cooking for myself, learning how to cook, laundry by myself, I did all the things all by myself.'' (Participant 5)

'' I learned to live alone. It includes the simple things like cleaning, like cooking, shopping, or something else.'' (Participant 6)

Subtheme 4: Professional development. On the other hand, the last subtheme professional development can be taken in two different categories: academic and professional career. Majority of the participants stated their professional aspects were developed. The immersive learning environment, including exposure to diverse perspectives, acquiring new skills, and gaining valuable work experiences contributed to enhance their adaptation. While some participants approached more academical perspective, the others indicated more behavioural perspective, as stated by several participants:

'' I learned how to communicate with professors and professionals in real life and I learned how to write formally.'' (Participant 6)

'' I think it helped me to see different workplaces and how people behave in these places. I think I learnt that only thing I need to do is my duties.'' (Participant 8)

DISCUSSION

To explore international students' sociocultural adaptation experiences, eight interviews were conducted and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis of the interviews revealed four distinct themes, highlighting international students' motivations, the challenges they faced, the coping strategies they employ, and the self-development in terms of personal and professional. The identified themes and subthemes provide valuable and comprehensive insight into international students' sociocultural experiences during their adaptation process in the UK (Appendix A). By acknowledging these themes, a smoother adaptation process can be experienced in the host country's sociocultural context.

In line with the literature, the results revealed that international students were affected by language proficiency and the advantages of enrolling prestigious UK universities. It is found that the allure of the top UK universities attracts international students due to the high-quality courses, learning resources, and employment opportunities (Wilkins et al., 2012; Ke et al., 2022). Nevertheless, international students may disregard the differences between the host country and their home country due to these external factors. As participants reported that there were no similarities in terms of lifestyle, education, and cuisine between two countries, this cultural and academic disparity may cause extra stress to during their adaptation process. Since moving another country is already a stressful process, many studies indicated that the less cultural similarity was associated with poor psychological and social adaptation (Zhai, 2002; Suanet & Van de Vijner, 2009; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Researchers also highlighted that poor social interaction and adaptation may lead to feelings of isolation and difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging in the host country (Cena et al., 2021; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Additionally, the interviews with international students provided a valuable insight into how the changes in their lifestyles, along with academic and cultural differences, caused socialising problems, and negatively influenced their adaptation process. The literature highlights certain key elements such as duration of stay in host country, language proficiency, and academic adaptation can affect adaptation positively (Alavi & Mansor, 2011; de Araujo, 2011; Rajab et al., 2014; Wilson, 2011). In line with these, the participants expressed how British accent and their proficiency in English created a language barrier to socialise. Furthermore, despite the participants has been residing in the UK for around 8 months, their adaptation process appeared to still be ongoing, due to the setbacks and certain demanding challenges.

When it comes to international students' stress levels, the study's results corroborate the previous studies, emphasizing a significant influence of stress on subjective health and psychological health of international students (Rosenthal et al., 2008; Zhou, et al., 2008). Prolonged stress is associated with various physical health problems that affects and weaken the immune system and endocrine system (Salleh, 2008). Furthermore, the process of adapting to a new environment might take an emotional toll on international students, and prolonged exposure can lead international students to experience anxiety and depression (Rice et al., 2012). In line with the previous research, the results demonstrated two things. Firstly, some participants reported physiological responses to stress, such as mouth ulcer and late period, which are consistent with body's stress response. Secondly, emotional responses in stressful situations, including anger, frustration, and crying were also reported. The results provides evidence to profound impact of stress on international students overall well-being. Moreover, while adapting to a new environment, international students also faced with unfamiliar academic requirements, leading to extra pressure and stress for them. The results were also in line with this previous research (Kuo, 2011; Banjong, 2015), as all participants indicated the academic difference between their home and host countries. This contributes extra stressful environment for them, and affects their adaptation process. Furthermore, these stress factors not only influence

international students' physical and psychological well-being but also impede their active engagement in cultural integration and learning experiences (Koo & Guicheng Tan, 2022).

Several studies highlighted the importance of coping skills during adaptation for international students to lower stress levels (Kato, 2012; Yue & Le, 2013; Doron et al., 2014; Freire et al., 2018). Especially, social support was found to be efficient coping strategy for international students to reduce adaptation stress (Kristiana et al., 2022; Yeh & Inose, 2003). It is also found that social support as coping skill plays a crucial role on psychological distress and subjective well-being of international students (Bae, 2020; Baghoori et al., 2022). In line with the previous literature, the results revealed similar conclusion highlighting that international students seek social support both as a coping strategy and as a stress prevention. Also, participants reported that they rely on their close friends from their home country for social support. Consistent with the results, researchers highlighted the importance of seeking social support from close friends and family as it was found to be most effective way to cope with stress (Barth et al., 2010; Schwarzer, et al., 2004). This may indicate the importance of established emotional bonds and shared cultural ties providing a safe environment where international students may find empathy.

Previous studies highlighted the importance of the social support derived from close friends and family in shaping and influencing the level of resilience (Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Rutter, 2006; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). As dealing with setbacks and challenges requires adaptive coping skills during adaptation process, resilience also plays major role (Friborg et al., 2003). Additionally, the negative correlation between resilience and stress was indicated, where the higher level of resiliency is associated with lower stress (Hjemdal et al., 2011). The results are directly in line with previous findings; the participants stated their resiliency, as well as their self-confidence increased due to the challenges experienced in the host country as an international student. As they expressed, they feel more self-sufficient as a result of their experiences. This might help them to adopt a positive outlook, which can have significant impact on individuals' capacity to adapt to stressors, and it has been associated with improved psychological well-being, better physical health, and adaptive coping mechanisms (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Even though they have faced with numerous social and cultural setbacks, the participants demonstrated some level of personal development. Many participants noted that living alone, exposure to new perspectives, and academic and social responsibilities contributed to be more resilient and led personal growth. Remarkably, this aligns with the concept of stress-related growth, which suggests challenges can act as catalyst for personal development and increased overall well-being (Linley & Joseph, 2004). The convergence between the results of current study and established theory underscores the significant impact of the adaptation process on various aspects of international students' stress levels, overall well-being, and personal growth. In line with the previous research, this can also accentuate the transformative nature of their experiences, emphasizing the key role that adaptive coping strategies and challenges play on influencing international students' adaptation journey, psychological distress and subjective health.

Strengths

Given the results of this study, focusing on international students who came from same cultural background and geographical region has notably enhanced a better understanding of shared experiences and challenges. RTA has provided a rich and detailed process for data analysis. The present study contributes to how Turkish students experienced challenges in the UK, where the social, cultural, and academic environment is entirely different, and how these differences influenced their psychological and physical well-being. Furthermore, although there are other studies conducted with Turkish students, the current research could potentially be the first study to explore their sociocultural adaptation experiences in the UK, focusing their psychological well-being and subjective health.

Limitations

Although this study has implications and contributions, it also has limitations which open up opportunities for further research in various directions. Primarily, the data were intended to collect from the voluntary international students from Balkan countries including Türkiye, Cyprus and Serbia; however, they could not be reached. The data were collected from only eight Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot international students in the United Kingdom. This ties the findings to the Turkish society and its specific culture. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all international students from different countries enrolled universities in the UK.

Another limitation stems from the eligibility criteria. Prospect participants from Balkan countries mostly visited different countries before studying in the UK; however, for the purpose of this study, UK should have been their first moving and living abroad experience. As there were almost no participants from Balkan countries other than Türkiye and Cyprus, international students from Balkan countries may have different views and experiences of their adaptation process.

Lastly, language proficiency may have had an effect on the participants' comfort in expressing themselves. As the participants were Turkish native speakers, their ability in English could have hindered to find the exact and proper

words, potentially impacting the fluency of the interview. Consequently, it is possible for participants that they conveyed their experiences based on the first similar word that came to their mind.

Future Research and Practical Implications

Despite adaptation is a prolonged process, the data were collected at one point of time from postgraduate students who have been in the UK for seven to nine months. Also, undergraduate international students' experiences might be different. Therefore, conducting longitudinal studies may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural adaptation experiences of international students, and their coping strategies, subjective health, and psychological well-being. As the study did not focus on gender differences, it is important to acknowledge that the adaptation process might differ based on gender-related factors (Lee et al., 2009), including the social values and norms. Further research can help to delve more extensively into the experiences and the specific needs of international students from same region. Ultimately, the study provides valuable knowledge for institutions, academics, and mental health care professionals to improve international students' sociocultural adaptation journey more effectively. The results can be used as resource materials for university authorities and researchers. Universities and other institutions might establish peer support programs to integrate international students more for smooth adaptation process. These strategies can help to increase the sense of belonging, learn more effectively, and create supportive environment for international students.

Conclusion

To conclude, although the eight international students had different characteristics and cultural background, there were common challenges found in the interview data. Their initial expectations to pursue their studies in the UK has evolved as they experienced the host country's diverse social and cultural dynamics. The results suggested that cultural disparities, and social rules might exert a significant influence on the sociocultural adaptation. Due to the disparities, international students tend to seek social support from their close friends and families from their home country. Additionally, adapting effective coping strategies has been found to be beneficial for subjective health and overall well-being. Despite the challenges, international students reported enhanced resiliency throughout their adaptation journey, which also made a positive impact on their personal development. Overall, the results provide a comprehensive insight into the sociocultural adaptation process experienced by international students coming from a same geographical region in their host countries.

REFERENCES

Alavi, M., & Mansor, S. M. S. (2011). Categories of problems among international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 30,* 1581-1587.

Alazzi, K., & Chiodo, J. J, (2006). Uncovering problems and identifying coping strategies of Middle Eastern university students. *International Education, 35*(2), 65-81.

Aldwin, C., & Stokols, D. (1988). The effects of environmental change on individuals and groups: Some neglected issues in stress research. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 8,* 57-75.

An, R., & Chiang, S. Y. (2015). International students' culture learning and cultural adaptation in China. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, *36*(7), 661-676.

Andrade, M. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education, 5*(2), 131-154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589

Araiza, M. J., & Kutugata, A. (2013). Understanding stress in international students of higher education in a Mexican private university. *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences, 106,* 3184-3194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.368

Arthur, N. (1998). The effects of stress, depression, and anxiety on postsecondary students' coping strategies. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*(1), 11-22.

Bae, S. M. (2020). The relationship between social capital, acculturative stress and depressive symptoms in multicultural adolescents: Verification using multivariate latent growth modelling. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 74*, 127-135.

Baghoori, D., Roduta Roberts, M., & Chen, S. P. (2022). Mental health, coping strategies, and social support among international students at a Canadian university. *Journal of American college health*, 1–12. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2114803

Banjong, D. N. (2015). International students' enhanced academic performance: Effects of campus resources. *Journal of International Students, 5*(1), 132-142.

Barth, J., Schneider, S., & Von Känel, R. (2010). Lack of social support in the etiology and the prognosis of coronary heart disease: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 72(3), 229-238.

Bektaş, D. Y. (2004). *Psychological adaptation and acculturation of the Turkish students in the United States* (Publication No. 12605051) [Doctoral dissertation, Middle East Technical University]. Middle East Technical University PHD E-thesis database.

Berry, J.W. (1997). Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46*, 5-68

Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration, distress and cultural identity. *British Medical Bulletin, 69*(1), 129-141.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brislin, R., & Yoshida, T. (1994). *Intercultural communication training: An introduction.* CA: Sage Publications.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, K. A., Orr, E., Durepos, P., Nguyen, L., Li, L., Whitmore, C., Gehrke, P., Graham, L., & Jack, S. M. (2021). Reflexive thematic analysis for applied qualitative health research. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(6), 2011-2028. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5010

Caplan, S. (2007). Latinos, acculturation, and acculturative stress: A dimensional concept analysis. *Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice, 8*(2), 93-106.

Carver, C. S., & Connor-Smith, J. (2010). Personality and coping. *Annual review of psychology, 61*, 679-704. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100352

Cena, E., Burns, S., & Wilson, P. (2021). Sense of belonging and the intercultural and   academicexperiences among international students at a university in Northern Ireland. Journal of International Students, 11(4),812-831. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i3.2541

Chou, P. C., Chao, Y. M. Y., Yang, H. J., Yeh, G. L., & Lee, T. S. H. (2011). Relationships between stress, coping and depressive symptoms among overseas university preparatory Chinese students: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health, 11*, 352. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-352

Clark, M. R. (2005). Negotiating the freshmen year: Challenges and strategies among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(3), 296- 316.

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies.* CA: Sage.

Dawson, M., & Pooley, J. A. (2013). Resilience: The role of optimism, perceived parental autonomy support and perceived social support in first year university students. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 1*(2), 38-49. http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/jets.v1i2.137

de Araujo, A. A. (2011). Adjustment issues of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities: A review of the literature. *Higher Education Studies, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v1n1p2

Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 48*(3), 504-518. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3779

Diaz-Guerrero, R. (1979). The development of coping style. *Human Development, 22,* 320-331.

Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Doron, J., Trouillet, R., Maneveau, A., Neveu, D., & Ninot, G. (2014). Coping profiles, perceived stress and health-related behaviors: a cluster analysis approach. *Health Promotion International,30*(1), 88–100. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dau090

Dorozhkin, I. N., & Mazitova, L. T. (2008). Problems of the social adaptation of foreign college students. *Russian Education and Society, 50*(2), 23-30.

Fischer, R., Scheunemann, J., & Moritz, S. (2021). Coping Strategies and Subjective Well-being: Context Matters. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 22,* 3413-3434. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00372-7

Fischer, T., Reuter, M., & Riedl, R. (2021). The digital stressors scale: Development and validation of a new survey instrument to measure digital stress perceptions in the workplace context. *Personality and Social Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.607598

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Gruen, R., & DeLongis, A. (1986). Appraisal, coping, health status, and psychological symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 571-579

Freire, C., Ferradás, M. M., Núñez, J. C., & Valle, A. (2018). Coping flexibility and eudaimonic well-being in university students. *Scandinavian journal of psychology,59*(4), 433–442. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12458

Friborg, O., Hjemdal, O., Rosenvinge, J. H., & Martinussen, M. (2003). A new rating scale for adult resilience: What are the central protective resources behind healthy adjustment? *International journal of methods in psychiatric research, 12*(2), 65-76. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/mpr.143

Furukowa, T. (1997). Cultural distance and its relationship to psychological adjustment of international exchange students. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, 51,* 87-91.

Garcia, M. S. S. (2015). The socio-cultural adaptation, openness to culture and success ofsojourn of foreign (Japanese) students in Tarlac City, Philippines. *International Journal of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, 9*(2).

Gebregergis, W. T., Mehari, D. T., Gebretinsae, D. Y., & Tesfamariam, A. H. (2020). The predicting effects of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and prior travel experience on sociocultural adaptation among international students. *Journal of International Students, 10*(2), 339-357. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.616

Greenland, K., & Brown, R. (2005). Acculturation and contact in Japanese students studying in the United Kingdom. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 145*(4), 373-389.

GulRaihan, M., & Sandaran, S. C. (2017). Sociocultural adaptation challenges of international students at a higher learning institution in Malaysia. *LSP International Journal, 4*(2), 85-101.

Gustems-Carnicer, J., Calderon, C., Batalla-Flores, A., & Esteban-Bara, F. (2019). Role of coping responses in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological well-being in a sample of Spanish educational teacher students. *Psychological Reports, 122*(2), 380-397.

Haugton, N. A., & Schödl, M. M. (2020). Preparing students for globalization without travelling: A multi-layered intercultural technology-mediated American and Israeli collaboration. *Frontiers in Education, 5,* 24.

Hechanova-Alampay, R., Beehr, T. A., Christiansen, N. D., & Van Horn, R., K. (2002). Adjustment and strain among domestic and international student sojourners. *School Psychology International, 23*(4), 458-474.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2023). Higher Education Student Data 2021/22.

Hjemdal, O., Vogel, P. A., Solem, S., Hagen, K., & Stiles, T. C. (2011). The relationship between resilience and levels of anxiety, depression, and obsessive–compulsive symptoms in adolescents. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, 18*(4), 314-321. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/cpp.719

Hogg, M. A., & Vaughan, G. M. (2014). *Social Psychology* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Jiang, N., Sato, T., Hara, T., Takedomi, Y., Ozaki, I., & Yamada, S. (2003). Correlations between trait anxiety, personality and fatigue: study based on the Temperament and Character Inventory. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, *55*(6), 493–500. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-3999(03)00021-7

Kato, T. (2012). Development of the coping flexibility scale: evidence for the coping flexibility hypothesis. *Journal of counselling psychology, 59*(2), 262–273. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027770

Ke, H., Junfeng, D., & Xiaojing, Z. (2022). International students' university choice to study abroad in higher education and influencing factors analysis. *Frontiers in psychology*, *13.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1036569

Keyes, K. M., Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & Hasin, D. S. (2011). Stressful life experiences, alcohol consumption, and alcohol use disorders: the epidemiologic evidence for four main types of stressors. *Psychopharmacology*, *218*, 1-17.

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). Becoming Intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. *SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks*, 5-320.

Klatzkin, R. R., Gaffney, S., Cyrus, K., Bigus, E., & Brownley, K. A. (2018). Stress-induced eating in women with binge-eating disorder and obesity. *Biological psychology*, *131*, 96-106.

Koo, K. K., & Guicheng Tan, A. (2022). *Lost in transitions: A review of stressors and mental health among international students in the United States.* Post-Secondary Education Student Mental Health: A Global Perspective. CDSPress.

Kouvonen, A., Kivimäki, M., Virtanen, M., Pentti, J., & Vahtera, J. (2005). Work stress, smoking status, and smoking intensity: an observational study of 46 190   employees. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, *59*(1), 63-69.

Kristiana, I. F., Karyanta, N. A., Simanjuntak, E., Prihatsanti, U., Ingarianti, T. M., & Shohib,   M. (2022). Social Support and Acculturative Stress of International Students. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *19*(11),   6568. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116568

Kumar, R. (2005). *Research Methodology – A Step by Step Guide for Beginners* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd

Kuo, Y. H. (2011). Language challenges faced by international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students, 1*(2), 38-42.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, coping, and appraisal*. New York: Springer

Lee, S. A., Park, H. S., & Kim, W. (2009). Gender differences in international students' adjustment. *College Student Journal, 43*(4). 1217-1227.

Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (2004). Positive change following trauma and adversity: A review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 17(1), 11–21.*

Luthans, F., Youssef-Morgan, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2015). Psychological capital and beyond. *Oxford University Press*, 35-58. https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2015/12574

McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 338*(3), 171–179. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199801153380307

Mesidor, J. K., & Sly, K. F. (2016). Factors that contribute to the adjustment of international students. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 262–282.

Mustaffa, C. S., & Ilias, M. (2013). Relationship between students adjustment factors and cross-cultural adjustment: A survey at the Northern University of Malaysia. *Intercultural Communication Studies, 22*(1), 279-300.

Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. SAGE publications.

Pittman, L. D., & Richmond, A. (2007). Academic and psychological functioning in late adolescence: The importance of school belonging. *The Journal of Experimental   Education, 75*(4), 270-290.

Priebe, S., Omer, S., Giacco, D., & Slade, M. (2014). Resource-oriented therapeutic models in   psychiatry: conceptual review. *The British journal of psychiatry: the journal of mental science*, *204*, 256–261. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.135038

Pritchard, M. E., Wilson, G. S., & Yamnitz, B. (2007). What predicts adjustment among college students? A longitudinal panel study. *Journal of American College Health,   56*(1), 15-21.

Rajab, A., Rahman, H. A., Panatik, S. A., & Mansor, N. S. (2014). Acculturative Stress among   International Students. *Journal of Economics, Business and Management, 2*(4),   2-5.   262-265. https://doi:10.7763/JOEBM.2014.V2.136.

Razgulin, J., Argustaitė-Zailskienė, G., & Šmigelskas, K. (2023). The role of social support   and   sociocultural adjustment for international students' mental health. *Scientific   Reports,   13*(893).   https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-27123-9

Rhein, D. (2018). Sociocultural adjustment and coping strategies of Korean and Japanese students in a Thai International   College*. International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies,   14*(1),   57-78. https://doi.org//10.21315/ijaps2018.14.1.3

Rice, K. G., Choi, C.-C., Zhang, Y., Morero, Y. I., & Anderson, D. (2012). Self-critical perfectionism,   acculturative stress, and depression among international students. *The   Counselling   Psychologist,   40*(4),   575-600. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000011427061

Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, J., & Thomson, G. (2007). Social connectedness among international students at an Australian university. *Social Indicators Research, 84*, 71-   82.

Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, J., & Thomson, G. (2008). The health and wellbeing of international students at an Australian university. *Higher Education, 55*, 51-67.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* (3rd ed.) London: Sage.

Rutter, M. (2006). Implications of resilience concepts for scientific understanding. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1094*(1), 1-12. http://dx.doi.org/10.1196/annals.1376.002

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods, 15*(1), 85-109

Sabouripour, F., & Roslan, S. (2015). Resilience, optimism and social Support among international students. *Asian Social Science, 11*(15). https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n15p159

Salleh, M. R. (2008). Life event, stress and illness. *The Malaysian journal of medical sciences: MJMS*, *15*(4), 9–18.

Sarantakos, S. (1998). *Social Research*. Hampshire: PALGRAVE

Selye, H. (1956). *The Stress of Life*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill

Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S. D. (2005). Stress and Health: Psychological, behavioural, and biological determinants. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 1*,607-628. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.144141

Schönfeld, P., Brailovskaia, J., Bieda, A., Zhang, X. C., & Margraf, J. (2016). The effects of daily stress on positive and negative mental health: mediation through self-efficacy. *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology, 16,* 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijchp.2015.08.005

Schwarzer, R., Knoll, N., & Rieckmann, N. (2004). Social support. *Health psychology*, *158*, 181.

Spencer-Oatey, H., & Xiong, Z. (2006). Chinese students' psychological and sociocultural adjustments to Britain: An empirical study. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum, 19*(1), 37-51.

Suanet, I., & Van de Vijver, F. J. R. (2009). Perceived cultural distance and acculturation among exchange students in Russia. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 19*, 182-197.

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). *Thematic analysis.* SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2

Triandis, H. (2006). Cultural intelligence in organizations. *Group and Organization Management, 31*(1), 20-26.

Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2007). Regulation of positive emotions: Emotion regulation strategies that promote resilience. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 8*(3), 311-333. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006- 9015-4

Tuna, M. E. (2003). Cross-cultural differences in coping strategies as predictors of university adjustment of Turkish and US students (Publication No. 579318) [Doctoral dissertation, Middle East Technical University]. Middle East Technical University PHD E-thesis database.

Vazquez, C., Hervas, G., Rahona, J. J., & Gomez-Baya, D. (2009). Psychological well-being and health. Contributions of positive psychology. *Annuary of Clinical and Health Psychology, 5*, 15-28.

Wang, X., Lu, L., Wang, X., Qu, M., Yuan, L., Gao, Y., & Pan, B. (2021). Relationships between cross-cultural adaptation, perceived stress, and psychological health among international undergraduate students from a medical university during COVID-19 pandemic: A moderated mediation model. *Frontiers in psychiatry, 12*, 783210. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.783210

Waqas, A., Khan, S., Sharif, W., Khalid, U., & Ali, A. (2015). Association of academic stress with sleeping difficulties in medical students of a Pakistani medical school: a cross sectional survey. *PeerJ, 3*(5). https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.840

Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1994). Acculturation strategies, psychological adjustment, and sociocultural competence during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*(3), 329-343.

Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of sociocultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 23*(4), 659-677.

Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M. S., & Huisman, J. (2012). Student choice in higher education: Motivations for choosing to study at an international branch campus. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 16*(5), 413- 433. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311429002

Wilson, G. P. (2011). *Fitting-in: Sociocultural adaptation of international graduate students* [Paper presentation]. Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA) Conference 2011, United States.

Wilson, J. K. (2013). *Exploring the past, present, and future of cultural competency research: The revision and expansion of the sociocultural adaptation construct* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Victoria University of Wellington.

Yaribeygi, H., Panahi, Y., Sahraei, H., Johnston, T. P., & Sahebkar, A. (2017). The impact of stress on body function: A review. *Experimental and Clinical Sciences Journal, 16,* 1057-1072. https://doi.org/10.17179/excli2017-480

Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *16*(1), 15-28.

Yue, Y., & Le, Q. (2013). Coping strategies adopted by international students in an Australian tertiary context. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies, 7*(2), 25-39. https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-011X/CGP/v07i02/53235

Zhai, L. (2002). *Studying international students: Adjustment issues and social support* (ED474481). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED474481.pdf

Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the United States: A systematic review. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35(2), 139-162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.011

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 33*(1), 63-75. htppts://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701794833

APPENDIX A: Comprehensive Thematic Table

Themes	Subthemes	Definition	Codes	Quotes
Motivations and expectations	Access to high-quality education	The participants stated their desire to study in the UK based on its' global recognition and quality.	Academic excellence Mostknown universities Global reputation	'' I chose to study in the UK due to variety reasons like education system, and they are recognized and respected globally.'' (Participant 8) '' It's already known by everyone that England is very good in education.'' (Participant 6) ''Moreover, studying in the UK offered access to renowned universities and a world-class education system. The country has a strong reputation for its academic excellence, with universities that are globally recognized for their research.'' (Participant 7) '' UK was my first option because of its reputation for high-quality education, diverse range of universities and programs.'' (Participant 3) '' So, it was my actually childhood dream to visit the UK, and I knew that its education quality is the best in the Europe.'' (Participant 1)
	Language proficiency and improving English	The participants expressed their familiarity with the English language.	Studying in English Improving the current English language level Prior knowledge of English language	'' I wanted to choose a country where English is spoken as a native.'' (Participant 6) '' I wanted to improve my language skills.'' (Participant 4) '' Also, in addition, my knowledge of English, a big plus.'' (Participant 5) ''I chose to study in the UK because the language. I did not want to learn a new language in Europe.'' (Participant 7)
	Curiosity to experience history and	The participants stated how they are willing to	Multiculturalism Polite communication	

	cultural immersion	experience the historical and cultural places, and daily life of the UK.	Historical places Modernity and luxury Traditions of the host country Diversity	''I was thinking about the UK as a place of rich history, royalty, and tradition. Also the unique blend of history, culture, and modernity. I was excited about experiencing a different culture and way of life.'' (Participant 3)
				'' Also, I was literally excited to see lots of historical places, churches across the UK.'' (Participant 5)
				'' Well, I think my vision of the UK was the vibrant cities like London, Manchester, and Edinburgh, and their charming buildings. I was expecting see lots of historical places.'' (Participant 7)
				'' But my perception about the UK was the glamourous country with historical places, and luxury lifestyle by earning lots of money. I was ready to experience everything as I said.'' (Participant 4) '' I expected people living in the UK are coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, which is very good for me as an international student.'' (Participant 8)
Challenges and social adjustment	Prearrival challenges	Participants expressed multifaceted challenges and difficulties in the new environment.	Visa application process Visa documents	''You have to through a lot of documentations and process. The visa process is something else like Europeans do not experience. I'm not sure that European people would understand entirely that the pain we are going through to get a visa.'' (Participant 1)
				'' It was difficult and exciting process to come here because of visa requirement from Turkish citizens.'' (Participant 4)
	Comparison of host and home countries	The participants explained how their home country and the host country differs in different areas.	Limited social environment Building social relations Education's delivery system Cultural differences Similarities Academic differences Cuisine differences	'' Definitely not. People in Cyprus care about hospitality and generosity, but in the UK, they are so different.'' (Participant 4) '' I can't say that we are very similar. Culturally, this country is more like an individual society than my country.'' (Participant 6) ''The only similar thing with Turks is the conception of tea. They drink a lot like us, it is really funny to have it with my flatmate. She has it white, and I drink as black.'' Participant 5) '' When I saw baked beans, I felt so excited because I thought it would be the same as in Turkey, but it was sweet! Now, I became one of them and eating 55p pizza nearly every day. I really miss our food.'' (Participant 2) '' We have lots of midterms, quizzes, and finals in Turkish system compared to the UK. But they only have assignments in my department. This is also like creates academic adjustment problems.'' (Participant

				4). ''UK's education system is based on independent learning and studying, whereas the Turkey's education system is more like memorization of the subjects. Everything seems so easy in here, but very different than Turkish system.'' (Participant 3). ''In my country, rote-based exam systems is common, but here there is a learning-based homework system.'' (Participant 6) ''When I was in Turkey my university taught me a lot of psychological disorders. I know everything about it. I know a lot of different therapies. It was very deep. We learned a lot, but when I came here it's just like a summary.'' (Participant 5) ''I cannot really come up with any similarities at the moment, because to my eyes they are completely different in terms of perspectives, living style, belief system, working styles.'' (Participant 1) ''No, I don't think so. These two countries are completely different like people in here don't mind about others' businesses, but in Turkey they talk a lot about others.'' (Participant 2)
	Lifestyle challenges	The participants expressed their initial social challenges in the new environment, and how it affected their lifestyle.	Changing in habits Opening and closing times Socialising occasions Accent differences Language barrier Mentality and the vision of the local people	'' I was really extremely social and outgoing person, and the moment I got here it was really hard for me to find friends actually.'' (Participant 1) ''I think the language was the challenge for me. I thought I speak and understand English before coming here, but I realized that I have difficulties to understand British accent.'' (Participant 2) ''I had a more active life where I came from, so in here, I live a somewhat quiet life. It seems a bit boring to me.'' (Participant 6) ''Language barrier was the worst challenge I had I guess. Also, because of the academic differences, I couldn't adapt to my assignments well. And I can say social interactions.'' (Participant 3) ''At first, socialising yes, but now I still have some problems with the education system. I don't think I will adapt their system, to be honest. It's completely different than my country.'' (Participant 4) '' But, to me, it's just a small village because I am a big city girl. It is really difficult to find something to do when compared to my country.''

				(Participant 5)
				''We have lots of shopping malls. They're also open in a very late hours, but here everywhere closes at 6 in the evening. This is a very big social challenge.'' (Participant 5)
				''Yes, I had a little difficulty adjusting to social life… In my country, I never had to think about such things. I could reach anything at any hour, opening and closing hours restrict socialising according to me.'' (Participant 6)
				'' It is really difficult to be in a same energy with people you are not familiar culturally. In Turkey, I think we are more developed in sense of humour, fashion, perspectives between most of the university students. But in here, they are like child, they are thinking like they have nothing to do.'' (Participant 8)
Stress and coping strategies	Response to stress	The participants mentioned their experiences of physical symptoms and feelings of irritability as a result of stress.	Feeling anger Showing emotional reactions Crying Avoidance Bodily reactions Irritability	'' I became very angry. I got triggered easily. I don't want to talk with anyone when I am stressed. I just focus on the thing I feel stressed.'' (Participant 8) ''I am trying to stay home and try to avoid everything. This is a bad thing. This, this might be a bad thing, but, but I'm trying to suppress my emotions, and I'm trying to think. I try to stay calm (Participant 5).'' ''The first is me crying actually, and I don't like this way of me trying to solve problems. Just because I stress myself a lot, my body experiences delayed period time to time.'' (Participant 1) '' I don't have specific responds behaviourally, but my body does. I observe some changes on my body like acne on my face, acne like red dots near my mouth. When I see them, I feel like the situation I am in is so bad.'' (Participant 2) ''I am a person who becomes angry and frustrated easily actually. I stress a lot about many things if I don't think I have a control on them.'' (Participant 3)
	Stress prevention	The participants expressed variety of prevention technique that they use regularly.	Hobbies Relaxation techniques Social support from close friends Distraction	'' By talking people I know so close. My best friends are the ones who support me.'' (Participant 7) '' I play video games and watch TV series I like.'' (Participant 2) ''I like to go for a walk, and listen to some good music, especially Britney Spears.'' (Participant 5) '' I do yoga and meditation every day before sleeping.'' (Participant 4)

				''I have never lost contact with my friends in my country. I talked to them whenever I encounter any difficulties.'' (Participant 6)
	Coping with stress	The participants talked about range of coping strategies to deal with stress.	Social support Being busy with cookery Seeking therapist Distracting activities	''I play video games. I kinda run away from the situations. It's easier for me to focus my game and satisfy myself by winning.'' (Participant 2) '' I really like to bake cakes and cookies. In here, it is not always possible for me to bake things. So, I cook.'' (Participant 7) '' I make myself a coffee and call my friends in Turkey. We talk about many things even it's not valuable, or we just gossip.'' (Participant 8) '' I tend to talk with my friends and my mom whenever I have problems socializing and addressing my problems with the people that actually helps me and calms me down.'' (Participant 1) '' In such situations, I call my friends who think the same as me, and share the problem with them. It is comforting to have them with me.'' (Participant 6) ''So, I facetime with my different friends or my friend groups in Cyprus, like, I can say nearly every day.'' (Participant 4) '' I can say with the support of my friends from Turkey.'' (Participant 5) '' Oh, and also, I talk with my closest friends to discuss the situation and find a solution for that.'' (Participant 2) '' To deal with that, I talk with my closest friends almost every day on FaceTime.'' (Participant 3) '' I have started receiving therapy here, it is also helpful for me at the time. I can learn how to, you know, react to my emotions, and then move on.'' (Participant 1)
Personal and professional growth	Resilience	The participants stated their resilience has enhanced as a result of their experiences of living abroad.	Learning everything alone Trying to complete everything alone Self-sufficient	''So yes, I think it helped me to be more resilient to everything.'' (Participant 3) ''Definitely yes. It is really a different and difficult experience everyone should experience once in their lifetime to be more resilient for the difficulties in life.'' (Participant 7) '' You need to learn to do everything alone at first. So that's why you become more resilient I guess'' (Participant 8).

				''I think mostly helped me to be more resilient in different areas like stressful situations, and situations that I do not know, let's say that gives me like anxious feelings. So, I guess they helped me for improving my resilience.'' (Participant 4) ''Yes, exactly. I think I learnt how to stand on my feet as a strong woman. I learnt that I am enough, I can easily say to myself.'' (Participant 5)
	Self-confidence	The participants expressed how their belief in their own abilities and capacity to control their lives increased.	Maturity Self-reliance Confidence Self-assurance	''I think I gained resistance to loneliness. I can say that I learned how to handle with lots of things in my life by myself and it helped to improve and develop some coping skills like positive self-talk.'' (Participant 7) ''I think I learnt how to stand on my feet as a strong woman. I learnt that I am enough, I can easily say to myself.'' (Participant 5) '' I can truly say, I can do anything by myself, that's fine. I think I gained some self-assurance or confidence.'' (Participant 4) ''It doesn't mean that I don't care important things in my life, but I realized after moving abroad, I am the only one who is in control in my life, so I that's why I think like that.'' (Participant 2) ''Personally, I feel like a grown woman now.'' (Participant 8) ''The fact that I was able to handle all of this on my own increased my self-confidence.'' (Participant 6)
	Developing life skills	The participants explained how they developed ability to manage their own lives.	Life skills Household chores Domestic skills Empowerment Independent living Cultural awareness	'' I learned to live alone. It includes the simple things like cleaning, like cooking, shopping, or something else.'' (Participant 6) '' And when it comes to personal thing, not living as the princess of her mothers and father's house anymore, and doing my own work, cooking for myself, learning how to cook, laundry by myself, I did all the things all by myself.'' (Participant 5) ''In here, everything depends on you, your cleaning, eating, shopping, billing because you are building your own life as an adult person.'' (Participant 4) ''On a professional level, I think I gained valuable skills and experiences that helped me to enhance my career prospects.'' (Participant 3)

				''I think professionally I grown a lot. I can say that thanks to my assignments and my organization of the lectures, I researched a lot to understand the topic, to complete my assignments. I can say that this helped me lot to develop my researching skills, how to approach a research question, how to write an essay.'' (Participant 4) '' I think, being together with different cultures and learning about the world, views of people from other countries, develop me a lot when it comes to professionally, or professional life, because I see that some things are a very different when it comes to cultural context.'' (Participant 5)
	Professional development	Participants explained how they gained experience and required knowledge for their professional life.	Research skills Global mindset Career preparation Communication skills	'' As a professional, I learned how to communicate with professors and professionals in real life and I learned how to write formally.'' (Participant 6) '' I think professionally it helped me to improve how to communicate with professors, how to ask for help and other things.'' (Participant 7) '' For professionally, I think it helped me to see different workplaces and how people behave in these places.'' (Participant 8)