

## Original Article

# International Medical Students' Adaptation to University Life in Egypt: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Adaptation to university life is a challenging process especially when studying medicine. To facilitate and improve the process of adaptation of undergraduate medical students during their university life, different barriers and challenges should be addressed to create an effective academic and social support system.

**Objective(s):** This study aims to explore the factors affecting the adaptation of international medical school students to university life in Egypt.

**Methods:** All first-year undergraduate international students studying at medical school Ain Shams University were invited to join the focus group sessions. Five focus group discussions were conducted till data saturation was reached.

**Results:** Our study included 34 international students (Arabs and Non-Arabs). Three main themes, nine subthemes, and thirty-four codes were generated. The motivation theme included: studying medicine and studying in Egypt. The acculturative stress theme included: subthemes of cultural differences, accommodation conditions, longing for family, and language differences. The students' adaptation to school themes included: the subthemes of successful integration, as well as personal/emotional and academic adaptation.

**Conclusion:** Our study findings highlighted significant issues regarding adapting international students to university life in Egypt. Academic, cultural, language and accommodation support are essential for successful adaptation and integration into both academic and social life.

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## INTRODUCTION

As globalization makes a wider range of international connections possible, questions about how to foster intercultural dialogue and diminish the ethnocentric perspective of individuals have sparked attention throughout the academic spectrum. When people study abroad, encouraging intercultural adaptability is crucial to this effort <sup>(1)</sup>.

Several hypotheses and theories are frequently applied to explain cultural adaptation, one of these theories is the social isolation theory, which defines a person's physical deportation from their country of origin as well as their removal from a set of customs, laws, and social interaction patterns. As for the cultural shock theory, it is an additional theory that examines how living abroad affects a person's general health. The last one is the cultural change theory, which states that other family members' personalities are likewise influenced by challenges in the new culture. Any situation where cultural adaptation is involved may fit into one or more of these theories <sup>(2,3)</sup>.

All university students encounter academic stress. In addition to this stress, international students suffer

from other stress factors due to the burden of acculturation. That is why the international students' ability to cope with these academic stressors will relatively be weak in comparison to the native students <sup>(4,5)</sup>.

Previous research suggested that when studying abroad, international students face a variety of difficulties, including cultural differences and issues that are closely related to them (such as language barriers, trouble adjusting to religious beliefs, and the related restrictions on lifestyle, traditions, and dietary habits), as well as psychological difficulties, like isolation, loneliness, and difficulties making friends in the local community <sup>(6)</sup>.

To start with, language is considered an essential tool for foreigners to interact and engage with host people, which is crucial for expanding their social network. English proficiency can be a barrier to social interaction and help-seeking behaviors, which could endanger the psychological health of students <sup>(7)</sup>. Additionally, English competency was found to be a predictor of both psychological and social adaptation. Lower levels of English proficiency are associated with greater acculturative stress and psychological

suffering. As was seen, these difficulties may have a detrimental effect on Chinese students' mental health <sup>(7, 8)</sup>.

Medical students face many types of stress, namely academic stress because of the long school duration, the difficulty of studying material, the psychological stress from the tests, the peer pressure, or the students' personal problems <sup>(9)</sup>. Besides being medical students, international students live in a completely different environment, with language barriers, cultural barriers, a different study system, academic problems, as well as some financial problems. Students also have concerns regarding the comfortability of living in the dorms and their satisfaction with school members and colleagues. Hence, students are prone to acculturative stress that will affect their mental and psychological health with consequences such as: anxiety, depression, and somatization disorders <sup>(10,11)</sup>.

In a previous study that measured the level of anxiety and depression among international students in Germany, 26% of the participants reported suffering from moderate stress, and 23% reported suffering from severe stress mostly due to academic and non-academic stressors <sup>(10)</sup>.

In other words, failure of cross-cultural adaptation will lead to the occurrence of acculturative stress. This in turn will lead to academic challenges and serious mental and psychological illness in international students, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation <sup>(9)</sup>. Due to linguistic challenges, cultural disparities, and economic problems, international students from non-English-speaking countries with lower socioeconomic positions have more difficulty adjusting academically. These students struggle academically; have poor physical and mental health; and undergo a significant amount of acculturation stress <sup>(12)</sup>.

Egypt has become a perfect choice for international students to pursue their educational goals because of Egypt's geographical location, financial aspects, and cultural and religious background. The proportion of international students has noticeably increased accounting for almost half of all first-year students enrolled in the 2021 academic year in a university in Egypt. International students frequently face difficulties that are exclusive to the typical school experience, in addition to factors that may increase acculturative stress (which lie in cultural differences, language barriers, comfortability in accommodation, academic difficulties, perceived discrimination, feeling homesick, and insufficient social support). Generally, these students come from different countries; for example, from Jordan, Syria, Iraq, India, Nigeria, and South Sudan <sup>(13)</sup>.

That being said, scholars have not comprehensively investigated the international

students' experiences and the difficulties they face while studying in Egyptian universities. Accordingly, these deficiencies were taken into consideration.

Notably, the more knowledge the school administration gathers about stressors and factors associated with the acculturation process, the more effective programs the administrations could design to help students find their way at the school through institutional, academic, social, psychological, and linguistic interventions <sup>(3)</sup>.

### **Research Knowledge Gaps:**

Adaptation to university life is a challenging process, especially in studying medicine. To facilitate and improve the process of adaptation of undergraduate medical students during their university life, different barriers and challenges should be addressed to create an effective academic and social support system.

### **Research Question:**

Are international medical school students adapted to university life in Egypt?

### **Research Objective:**

This study aims to explore the factors affecting the adaptation of international medical school students to university life in Egypt.

## **METHODS**

To enhance the credibility of this study, the Equator guidelines for qualitative research were applied by adopting the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) was done throughout the study, from the selection of study team till reporting and interpreting the results <sup>(14)</sup>.

### **2.1 Research Team and Bias Management:**

The main research team consisted of one professor, two assistant professors, and one teaching assistant. There were two teaching assistants who cooperated with the main research team and helped in the process of notetaking during FGDs. That is in addition to volunteering students from India, South Sudan, and Yemen who helped in gathering students; suggested suitable dates and time of FGDs; and summarized the main ideas after each FGD. All research team members were trained in Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (e.g., reading CQR books, reviewing CQR articles, or had experience in working on similar research) and shared similar research interests. As two of the four researchers are members of the international students' office, their knowledgeable experience helped in improving the research team's knowledge about relevant themes found in the

participants' descriptions of their adaptation experiences. The team also discussed and reported its biases and expectations for the data before beginning the interpretive process to achieve an unbiased analysis.

**2.2 Study Participants:** All first-year medical international students were invited to join the FGDs. They were accessed by the help of the international students' office through WhatsApp groups and official e-mails after applying a request to the vice dean for students' affairs to get the students list. Thirty-four participants (18 Arab students and 16 non-Arab students) agreed to participate. Five FGDs were conducted, and data collection stopped when saturation was reached. Each session included 4-12 participants. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants in the five FGDs are presented in Table 1.

**2.3 Instrument and Data Collection:** Five FGD sessions were conducted online by the same moderator using the Microsoft Teams application upon the students' wish due to the students' tight schedules. Suitable timing of the day as well as suitable days of the week were chosen according to the students' schedules. FGDs were conducted between November 5, 2021, and March 13, 2022. The dates and times were set beforehand to suit all participants. Generally, the online sessions increased students' participation, in-depth responses, feedback, and overall data quantity.

The audio recordings of the dialogues were transcribed for further analysis. All interviews lasted for approximately 40-60 minutes. At the end of the interviews, group leaders or note-takers summarized questions and responses to allow participants to revise their responses for clarifications or omissions.

#### 2.4 Interview Guide Development:

A moderator guide was constructed, including open-ended questions that served study aims before the initiation. This guide was constructed based on a literature review <sup>(15)</sup> and repeated meetings with research team members. Socio-demographic data was collected after the opening and the ice-breaking questions.

The moderator guide included open-ended questions which covered five main domains:

- **Motivation to study medicine** e.g., what were your motives to start studying medicine?
- **Studying abroad** e.g., what were your motives to start studying medicine abroad?
- **Expectations and worries.** e.g., which expectations or worries do you have concerning your future studies with respect to the existing cultural differences?

- **Academic and social adaptation**, e.g., what are the negative and positive factors affecting academic adaptation and what are the negative and positive factors affecting social adaptation?
- **Emotional and personal adaptation.** e.g., how could you describe your personal and emotional adjustment?

#### 2.5 Procedure of each FGD:

- Set up a date for interviews based on the students' study schedules.
- Both the purpose of the interview and the expected duration of the interview were explained.
- Informed consent was obtained from the participants. They were told their participation was totally voluntary and that they were free to leave the session if they don't agree to participate in the study.
- It was confirmed that the obtained information would be kept confidential, and ethical approvals would not be violated.
- Recording the interview was asked with an explanation of the importance of recording. Quick notes were taken by the researchers as well.
- Transcription was done within 24 hours.

#### 2.6 Data Management:

- **Raw Data Management:**
  - The moderator and note-taker retrieved and debriefed notes immediately after each session.
  - Transcripts were formed manually and revised twice.
- **Content Analysis and Coding:**
  - After the transcription process, coding began with 3 coders. Codes were categorized then categories were conceptualized into different themes. Theme creation was conducted manually and with the help of a computer software program (MAXQDA) <sup>(16)</sup>.

#### 2.7 Data Analysis

The following steps were utilized for analysis (domain development, themes and subthemes formulation, themes' and subthemes revision, and developing codes within subthemes). Two researchers independently viewed the final transcripts to develop a list of themes, subthemes and codes.

During the process, the themes and subthemes were repeatedly revised and "discussed" among the research team members until the list was finalized.

The results of the current study were finalized after repeated revisions and team consensus.

#### Ethical approval and consent of participants

Permissions for study conduction were obtained from the School of Medicine, Ain Shams University Ethics

Committee. Oral informed consent was obtained from the study participants before completing the questionnaire (Ethical Approval Number: FWA 000017585). Participants were assured that the final report would not contain any personally identifiable information.

## RESULTS

### Theme 1: Motivation

#### 1.1 Studying Medicine

Most of the participants reported that their motives for studying medicine were their passion for biology in high school, and their desire to become doctors and to help their people.

*“What motivated me is the condition that our people are in; they are in a critical condition and need people to help them to get out of that bad situation. So, the first thing that encouraged me is the living conditions of our people back home.”* - a male student from South Sudan.

Some participants mentioned that they had no motive to study medicine, but that it was their family’s desire.

#### 1.2 Studying Abroad (in Egypt)

Regarding the students' motives for studying abroad, some participants mentioned that the situation in their countries was unstable due to political or financial issues. So, they chose to study abroad to achieve their dream of becoming a doctor.

Most of the students reported that they chose Egypt because of its reasonable tuition fees compared to those of their own countries, and because of the presence of many internationally accredited medical schools in addition to the availability of special programs for international students in Egypt.

Most students expressed their comfort in choosing an Arabic and Islamic country to study in. About half of them reported that they wanted to integrate with different nationalities and ethnicities.

A few students stated that they were studying in Egypt simply because they immigrated with their families to Egypt.

### Theme 2: Acculturative Stress

#### 2.1 Cultural Differences:

Some students, especially students from South Sudan and Nigeria, reported their fear of cultural differences.

*“Living abroad has taught me to pay attention to whom I talk to. Many relationships are not within the circle of friendship but within the circle of superficial relationships”* - a female student from Nigeria.

On the other hand, most of the participants reported success in creating a social network.

*“Yes, based on our interactions, I have good contacts with even the barber here”* - a male student from India.

Most of the participants reported that Egyptian food had a wide range of delicious varieties. However,

some of the participants mentioned that Egyptian food was totally different from their home country's food, and that they did not like its taste. *“The food is the problem that is affecting me a lot”, “the food difference was a problem; I don't like to try the food here.”* - a male student from India.

#### 2.2 Accommodation Conditions:

Almost all the students reported that they searched for information about accommodation, including places for accommodation (whether the official dorms or private apartments), available means of transportation, and the cost of different accommodation issues when they decided to study in Egypt.

Regarding accommodation places, most international non-Arab students were living in the official dorms, while Arabic speakers reported that they chose to live in shared accommodation when they first arrived. Furthermore, they reported that transportation options were available and cheap. However, a few participants expressed their struggle with the internet service in the accommodation place.

#### 2.3 Longing for Family:

According to almost all international students, homesickness and longing for family were affecting their adaptation in Egypt. *“We feel lonely without our families.”* - a male student from Yemen.

#### 2.4 Language Differences:

Almost all non-Arab students reported that language differences were the most stressful challenges they faced in Egypt. Most of them mentioned their worries about not understanding patients and therefore missing the real experience of studying medicine *“I always worry about dealing with patients. I feel that I will not be able to speak clearly to them. And so, I will miss out on the real experience.”* - a female student from Nigeria.

Some students mentioned that they would not be able to work in Egypt after graduation because of the language differences.

Some international non-Arab students mentioned that they wanted to learn Arabic to help them to adjust in Egypt. *“I just translate or use Google Translate to explain to them what I'm actually trying to convey.”* - a female student from India.

Regarding the Arabic speakers' participants, a few of them stated that they faced a problem with their Arabic dialect. *“The difference in the dialect was obvious as soon as I arrived, especially in the difference in the names of products. When I was in Palestine, I used to think that the dialect was an easy thing to learn, but when I came, I had problems with understanding.”* - a male student from Palestine.

### Theme 3: Students' Adaptation to School:

#### 3.1 Successful Integration of International Students

##### 3.1.1 Social Network:

When the participants were asked about how good their social networks were, some of them mentioned that they were living with their families, so they did not need any social networks.

Many Arabic speaking participants relayed that they had good social networks, while some of the non-Arabic speaking participants indicated that they built social networks cautiously and had difficulties in building a network because of the language barrier.

*"I have some Egyptian friends, but we cannot communicate well because of the language barrier."* - a male student from India.

### 3.1.2 Engagement in Students' Activities:

Most of the participants stated that they were involved in different student activities at school. Some students mentioned that the school allowed international students to organize some activities and that these activities included holding exhibitions and various artistic activities that led to the consolidation of relations and sharing information about different cultures.

Most students reflected that the mentorship program and the international students' office affected their experiences positively. On the other hand, a few of them reported that they felt that their opinions did not matter. Many students relayed that there was miscommunication between the institution (whether professors or employees) and international students at

the school due to many factors, like the language and cultural barrier.

## 3.2 Personal and Emotional Adaptation

### 3.2.1 Fear of Academic Failure

Most participants (non-Arab students) were afraid of academic failure, because their families told them that they were privileged to have a chance to study medicine, so they must succeed regardless of the tension they might face.

### 3.2.2 Exam Stress:

For most international students, the frequency of exams was affecting their personal and emotional adaptation.

### 3.3 Academic Adaptation:

Some students mentioned that they were hardly adjusting academically due to the difference between the educational systems in their countries and Egypt, regarding the number and the degree of difficulty of the studied curricula. Most students stated that the school of medicine had a harder curriculum than any other university.

Students reported their need to have an appropriate orientation of the education system, in order not to take much time in the adaptation process. All students agreed that studying medicine needed skillful studying habits, different from the studying habits they had before.

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the studied international medical students who participated in the Focus Group Discussions**

No. of FGD	Number of the Attended Students	The Mean Age of the Attendees	Gender Distribution of the Attendees		Nationalities Distribution of Attendees
			Male	Female	
1	6	21.5	3	3	1 South Sudanese 2 Indians 1 Somalian 2 Nigerians
2	4	19.5	2	2	1 South Sudanese 2 Indians 1 Nigerian
3	6	21.5	4	2	4 Bangladeshis 2 Indians
4	6	19.6	3	3	1 Saudi Arabian 2 Yemenis 1 Palestinian 2 Jordanians 1 Pakistani
5	12	19.83	10	2	9 Yemenis 2 Saudi Arabians

Three main themes, nine sub-themes, and 34 codes were extracted in the analysis of the five FGDs as shown in Table 2

**Table 2: Factors affecting the adaptation process of the studied international medical students**

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	
1-Motivation	1.1 Studying Medicine	1. Passion	
		2. Liking biology	
	1.2 Studying Abroad (in Egypt)	3. Family desire	
		4. Helping my people	
2- Acculturative Stress	2.1 Cultural Differences	5. Difficult situation in the native country: politics, budget issues.	
		6. Interaction with different ethnicities and nationalities.	
	2.2 Accommodation Conditions	7. Egypt is an Arabic Islamic country.	
		8. Immigration with family	
	2.3 Longing for Family	9. Fear of cultural differences	
		10. Different food styles	
	2.4 Language Differences	11. Lack of suitable prepared meals	
		12. Problems in the official dorms	
13. Expensive rent prices			
14. Noisy housemates			
3- Students' Adaptation to School	3.1 Successful Integration of International Students	15. Homesickness	
		16. Fear of not understanding and interacting with patients because of language barriers (Deficiency or different dialects)	
	3.2 Personal and Emotional Adaptation	17. Inability to work in the host country	
		18. Using the two languages in the host country: Arabic and English	
	3.3 Academic Adaptation	19. Learning Arabic	
		20. Language barriers between the faculty and students	
			21. Living with my family
			22. Difficulty to have social network outside the school because of language problems
			23. Different types of social networks
			24. Involvement of international students in students' activities
		25. Having common memories with Arab students	
		26. International students' office support	
		27. The mentorship program	
		28. Miscommunication	
		29. Our opinion does not matter.	
		30. I am privileged.	
		31. Pressure and frequency of exams	
		32. The hybrid system	
		33. Unavailable academic advisor	
		34. Skillful study habits	

## DISCUSSION

This study examined how undergraduate international medical students adapted to the university life in Egypt. Moreover, the main challenges that were faced by the students during the adaptation process were also evaluated.

Accordingly, a lot of the participants reported that there were various difficulties in adapting to the schools in Egypt. These difficulties were mainly because of the language deficiency, the academic challenges, and the cultural differences.

Generally, these aforementioned obstacles may often lead to problems in miscommunication, especially for non-Arabic speakers.

As was seen, the current study's findings were similar to the results of a qualitative study that was conducted at the United States (U.S.); the study explored Chinese international students' challenges regarding academic and sociocultural conditions. Through qualitative interviews, the study's findings showed that students studying in foreign countries face academic problems, social isolation, as well as cultural adaptation. To be more specific, these academic problems included: communication with their professors, classmates, as well as faculty staff members. As a result, students often have to deal with social isolation when they engage in various group activities. Moreover, the Chinese students had to culturally confront the different ways of thinking and behaving in the U.S. Therefore, to deal with these challenges, students used resources that were mainly provided by the university<sup>(18)</sup>.

Thus, as seen in the current study, by understanding these students' academic challenges better, the university, school, and faculty can acknowledge the students' needs and also start offering extra supportive campus resources and services. In other words, it is a necessity for the university to be ready to accommodate the needs of the students (not only academically but also socially and culturally). Furthermore, this study also suggests that the university needs to ready itself to be able to embrace international students immediately upon their arrival to the foreign country.

The students' transition from their own homeland to the country in which they will study necessitates their need to adapt and cope with the habits and culture of their host country<sup>(19, 20)</sup>. Bearing that in mind, adjusting to the local language, food, weather, and accommodation represents an important obstacle for these international students<sup>(9, 21)</sup>. To elaborate, this was repeatedly reported when interviewing the participants in the FGDs. They explained that the

adaptation to the country's culture and language represented a major stress factor. They also stated that they wished they had had more orientation and had been more prepared before arriving at the host country, especially in how to find suitable accommodation to stay in for a long time.

Generally, accommodation in a foreign country is always a major stressful problem for international students, as living in an unsuitable place is always associated with one or more negative emotions, including anger, disappointment, frustration, and sadness<sup>(22)</sup>. According to the FGDs, there are official dorms for international students in Egypt, and students always have the choice to either rent a private apartment or live in a private hostel, especially for Arabic speakers. This could be because of the strict rules and regulations that are applied in the official dorms.

Qualitative findings recorded a main concern of international students on comfortability in the accommodation place. Another stressful concern is the difference in the food choices between their original countries and the ones in the new host country. This finding is similar to findings from a previous study that showed that food had a huge impact on the adaptation process<sup>(23)</sup>.

The results of the current study are similar to those of another qualitative study that was done in Hungary. The study revealed the value of food consumption in the cultures of various ethnic groups. It was seen that the majority of the interviewed students generally shop for goods in establishments that were very similar or almost identical to those in their native countries. In other words, they buy products from stores that are very similar to or the same as those in stores in their home countries, and they also use the local market to cook their own traditional dishes (which they cannot find in restaurants) by themselves<sup>(22)</sup>.

As expected, it is difficult for students who come from various cultures and backgrounds at a young age with minimal or no experience to deal with their accommodation issues without being stressed. Ideally, international students must get more information about the geographical, social, food, and transportation aspects of their targeted country. However, documentation is simply not enough and is not the same as personal experience, so students should know this aspect beforehand<sup>(20, 22)</sup>.

According to the FGDs results, although Arab students can speak Arabic, they still face challenges when it comes to their dialect. That is because Egyptians speak in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and the students have to adapt their ears and tongues to it.

On the other side, Arab students also face difficulties in understanding the English that is used in academic settings. Therefore, these results are similar to findings from previous research which revealed that international students may undergo strong emotional effects from even the slightest cultural differences <sup>(24)</sup>.

The aforementioned English proficiency can be achieved when a student is motivated and dedicated. Nevertheless, this type of “culture shock” can be permanent and have profound negative effects. In other words, it can be difficult for a student who comes from a different culture to voluntarily engage in classroom activities <sup>(19)</sup>.

The present study illustrated how English proficiency could affect communication in all settings in school for both Arabic and Non-Arabic students alike. The results were similar to the findings of another study which revealed that language was indeed a great obstacle in the participants’ academic adaptation <sup>(25)</sup>.

Similarly, results from a previous study that was conducted at the University of Costa Rica revealed that many participants indicated that American English was a challenge for them despite that fact that they had studied English for several years in their home countries. In other words, the language difficulties are based on the speakers’ different accents, rate of speech, and pronunciation. For that reason, many participants had to find additional time to improve their English skills <sup>(26)</sup>.

Additionally, the current results revealed that international students also needed to adapt to the campus environment in several aspects, namely adaptation with friends, adaptation to courses, adaptation with employees, as well as adaptation to the campus organization. Shifts in the environment or conditions that are faced when becoming a student require an appropriate adaptation process. Students who fail to adjust themselves to these aforementioned conditions will regrettably face different problems, which will in turn cause them more pressure. The changes that the students experience are not only campus conditions (such as academic requirements), but also other conditions (such as: leaving home and parents to live abroad, searching for their own true identity, and making decisions related to their preferred career choice). For that reason, the adaptation of international students not only includes the aforementioned factors but also cultural factors as well. Thus, this makes students more likely to have stress <sup>(24)</sup>.

#### **Study Limitations:**

The nature of the qualitative research and the type of sampling used in this research interfere with generalization of the results.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our results represent a significant contribution to understanding the impact of institutional and social support in addressing international students’ needs. The results highlight the need of international students for support regarding different issues, like accommodations, and language. The results also confirm the generated evidence from previous relevant research about the importance of orientation before arriving at the host country which can help in enhancing the adaptation process, reducing the acculturative stress, and improving and accelerating the coping mechanism.

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#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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