

## Cultural adaptation challenges, academic stress, and social support: A study of Saudi students in Malaysia



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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the specific challenges faced by Saudi students studying in Malaysia, particularly the pressures related to achieving their academic goals abroad. Previous research has often looked at the general factors affecting international students' experiences but has not deeply examined the unique challenges faced by Saudi students who are studying abroad on scholarships. This research aims to identify the difficulties these students face in adapting to a new culture, understand how these challenges relate to their academic stress, evaluate the role of social support in easing this stress, and consider how this knowledge could help develop better support strategies for Saudi students in Malaysia. The research was conducted using a questionnaire given to a group of Saudi students in Malaysia. The findings indicate that social support helps lessen the link between cultural adaptation difficulties and academic stress, which is an important factor affecting their academic success and overall well-being. These results are significant as they can help improve the academic achievement and well-being of international students.

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### 1. Introduction

Saudi Arabian students' pursuit of higher education overseas is a life-changing experience full of many chances and obstacles. Although a more comprehensive knowledge of these characteristics among Saudi students is still lacking, the concomitant demands placed on students throughout this worldwide academic endeavor represent an essential field of study. High levels of constant strain were reported by students, especially when it came to their academic performance and the college application process. While students offered an assortment of adaptive, successful coping mechanisms, they also frequently absorbed these intense demands and resorted to drinking and drugs—though usually not to dangerous degrees to deal with ongoing stress (Leonard et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2023; Prayitno and Andayani, 2023). Moreover, previous research has offered insightful information on the worldwide issues affecting students' well-being, but there has not been a

thorough examination of the particular challenges experienced by Saudi students studying abroad (Fig. 1).

Prior research on overseas students has focused chiefly on general elements influencing their experiences, medical and health students rather than Saudi students sent for scholarship studies abroad (Alotaibi et al., 2020; Alotiby, 2022; Al-Shagawi et al., 2017; Das and Sahoo, 2016; Khalil et al., 2020; Shahin, 2020). However, there is still an apparent knowledge vacuum about the pressure factors Saudi students face when they travel abroad for their studies. In order to fully understand the academic and personal problems faced by Saudi students pursuing higher education abroad, it is critical to overcome this gap. Furthermore, research highlights the need for a deeper comprehension of Saudi students' perspectives and experiences in Western academic cultures (Alshehri, 2022).

Researchers must consider the findings of previous studies on Saudi students studying overseas (Joseph et al., 2023; Mukti and Ansyah, 2023), including those done in Malaysia. These investigations have shown specific stresses associated with linguistic hurdles, cultural differences, and academic expectations. For example, studies conducted in Malaysia have illuminated Saudi students' difficulties regarding academic achievement, language competency, and adaptation. These results emphasize the importance of

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investigating the factors that influence pressure within the larger context of Saudi students studying overseas. Considering these factors, this study aims to add to the body of knowledge by investigating the pressure factors that Saudi students face. At the same time, they pursue their academic goals abroad. This study attempts to provide a more specialized and thorough knowledge of the challenges experienced by Saudi students studying abroad by combining original research findings from studies on Saudi students in Malaysia with insights from earlier

research. The ultimate objective is to provide valuable insights for educators, administrators, and legislators concerned with the welfare of Saudi students negotiating the challenges of overseas education and to inform focused support systems and actions. Through this investigation, we hope to improve the scholarly conversation on the demands faced by foreign students and promote a greater comprehension of the particular difficulties of Saudi students during their educational journeys beyond the Kingdom.

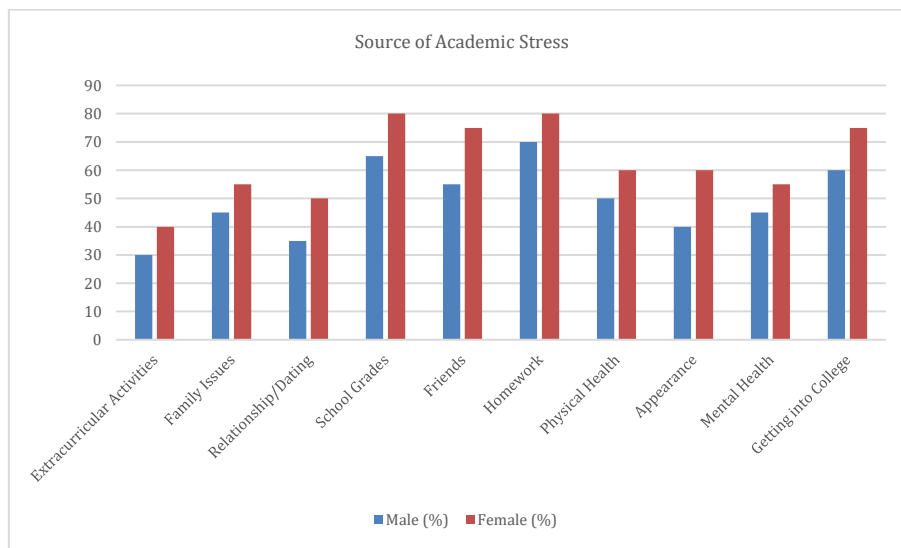


Fig. 1: Source of academic stress (Leonard et al., 2015)

Saudi students pursuing higher education in Malaysia have unique obstacles related to cultural adaptation (Jameel et al., 2022), including language proficiency issues and adjusting to disparate educational standards (Alshehri, 2022). This combination of stresses can substantially negatively affect their academic performance; thus, it is essential to look more closely at how academic stress and difficulties with cultural adaptation interact (GulRaihan and Sandaran, 2017; Jameel et al., 2022). Although previous research has examined many facets of the academic stress faced by overseas students, there is still a noticeable void in examining Saudi students' experiences in Malaysia. Focused attention needs to be paid to the subtleties of their difficulties adjusting to a new culture and the function of social support in reducing academic stress. This study's main objective is to thoroughly understand the connection between Saudi students' academic stress and difficulties adjusting to Malaysian culture, emphasizing the moderating effect of social support. By tackling this goal, the study hopes to provide subtle insights that might help design specialized support systems for this particular student population.

1. How do Saudi students in Malaysia face the predominant cultural adaptation challenges?
2. How does the experience of cultural adaptation challenges correlate with the academic stress levels of Saudi students?

3. To what extent does social support moderate the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and academic stress among Saudi students in Malaysia?
4. What are the potential implications of these findings for developing targeted support strategies for Saudi students pursuing higher education in Malaysia?

By thoroughly investigating these issues, this study seeks to close the current gap in the literature, offering a solid framework for comprehending and resolving the difficulties Saudi students encounter in Malaysia. It also provides valuable advice for educational institutions and support services. The introduction, literature review, results, and conclusions constitute the chronological sequence in which the study is presented. This study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the variables influencing the degree of academic stress experienced by foreign students studying overseas.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Education stress theory

Educational stress theory offers a framework for understanding the relationship between stress and academic achievement. The theory states that stress can positively and negatively affect academic achievement. Positive stress, also known as eustress,

motivates students to put more effort into academics and create better work (Sharma and Gupta, 2023). Conversely, negative stress, also known as distress, can make it more difficult for kids to take in and remember information, leading to lower grades and inferior academic performance. Several variables might impact the correlation between stress and academic achievement (Prasad et al., 2018), including:

- Individual factors, such as personality, coping skills, and social support, can influence how individuals perceive and respond to stressors.
- Academic factors, such as the difficulty of coursework, the workload, and the grading system, can influence the level of stress that students experience.
- Personal factors, such as relationship problems, financial difficulties, and health problems, can add to the stress that students experience.

## 2.2. Cultural adaptation challenges

Complications with cultural adaptation occur when people or groups move into a new cultural setting with different norms, values, and behaviors. These difficulties can appear in many areas of life, such as social relationships, communication, academic achievement, and personal well-being (Ladum and Burkholder, 2019).

Becoming competent to communicate in the language of the new culture is one of the biggest and most pressing issues people encounter. The inability to comprehend or speak the local tongue can hamper access to information and services, social contacts, and communication. Furthermore, navigating cultural differences, including conventions, traditions, social norms, and beliefs, can be difficult. This can cause misunderstandings, confusion, and feelings of alienation or isolation (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

It could be challenging to make new acquaintances and relationships when relocating to a different cultural setting since it frequently entails leaving behind preexisting social networks and support systems. This is especially true when dealing with linguistic and cultural hurdles. International students may also have to adjust to these new academic expectations because of variations in educational systems, teaching philosophies, and evaluation techniques (Ladum and Burkholder, 2019; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). The nervousness and stress brought on by acclimating to a new culture can seriously affect a person's general well-being. Cultural adaptation obstacles can lead to physical health concerns, mental health issues, and emotional anguish (Al-Sowygh, 2013; Das and Sahoo, 2016). Individuals should dedicate themselves to learning their native languages through immersion experiences, language exchange organizations, and classes to overcome these obstacles. One can understand customs, traditions, and social norms more deeply by participating in local activities,

events, and interactions. One can meet others with similar experiences and cultural backgrounds by joining clubs, organizations, or groups relevant to their interests or background. To improve their performance and adapt to new academic requirements, international students can use academic support services like study groups and tutoring (Al-Sowygh, 2013; Ashton-Hay et al., 2022; Chaiyasat, 2020; Joseph et al., 2023).

Maintaining emotional well-being during cultural transition requires prioritizing self-care behaviors, including leading a healthy lifestyle, resting, and seeking mental health help when necessary. Adjusting to a new culture takes time, flexibility, and an openness to new experiences. By comprehending the obstacles and implementing efficient tactics, people may traverse their novel cultural milieu and prosper in their selected residential or educational location (Shahin, 2020).

## 2.3. Student academic stress

In today's competitive and fast-paced educational environment, students are under increasing pressure to perform well. The stress that students experience from their schoolwork, tests, and extracurricular activities can negatively impact their mental and emotional health, which is why academic stress is becoming a more common worry (Shahin, 2020).

Several signs of stress might appear, such as anxiety, despair, and issues with one's physical health. Pupils may feel overwhelmed, depressed, and despairing, which might impair their immune systems, cause migraines and stomachaches, and interfere with their sleep (Alduraywish et al., 2023; Radhakrishnan et al., 2021). Their focus, concentration, and memory may all deteriorate, harming their academic performance and leading to problems and low marks. Sometimes, students distance themselves from friends and activities they used to like by withdrawing from social engagements (Alyami et al., 2017; Restrepo et al., 2023).

Several factors contribute to this pervasive academic stress. High expectations from parents, teachers, and themselves can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. The heavy workload of coursework, assignments, and exams can overwhelm students, leaving them feeling overworked and stressed. The competitive nature of higher education can foster unhealthy comparisons and a fear of failure, exacerbating stress levels. Inadequate sleep, poor time management skills, and financial concerns can further add to the overall stress experienced by students (Al Sultan et al., 2023; Shahin, 2020).

Students can use a range of ways to better their general well-being and handle academic stress. Procrastination can be decreased, and a sense of control over academic responsibilities can be gained by developing time management skills. Enhancing study techniques, such as taking better notes, participating in active learning, and preparing for

tests efficiently, can improve academic results and lessen stress. Stress-reduction methods like mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation exercises can help people feel less anxious and more relaxed. Consulting educators, therapists, or mental health specialists can offer direction, encouragement, and stress-reduction techniques (Alyami et al., 2017; Shahin, 2020; Sharma and Gupta, 2023). Additionally, prioritizing a healthy lifestyle, including regular exercise, adequate sleep, and a balanced diet, can improve well-being and reduce stress levels. By understanding the factors contributing to academic stress and implementing effective stress management strategies, students can navigate the demands of higher education and achieve a healthier balance between academic pursuits and personal well-being (Alyami et al., 2017).

#### 2.4. Cultural adaptation challenges and students' academic stress

Several studies have examined the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and students' academic stress. These studies have found that cultural adaptation challenges can hurt academic performance, including lower grades, higher dropout rates, and lower levels of satisfaction with academic experiences. One study found that international students who reported experiencing more cultural adaptation challenges had lower grades than students who reported experiencing fewer challenges. Another study found that cultural adaptation challenges significantly predictor dropout among international students (Prayitno and Andayani, 2023; Ullah et al., 2023).

#### 2.5. The moderating role of social support

Social support can help to buffer the adverse effects of cultural adaptation challenges. Studies have found that social support from peers, family members, and faculty can help international students adjust to their new culture and succeed academically (Ladum and Burkholder, 2019; Ng et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2023).

In conclusion, research highlights the complexity of the difficulties Saudi students abroad have in adjusting to a new culture and the strain of their studies. It emphasizes the necessity of focused support systems and interventions to cater to the unique requirements of Saudi students and enable their effective adjustment and academic performance in global learning environments.

### 3. Hypothesis development

#### 3.1. Cultural adaptation challenges and students' academic stress

An assortment of research on the difficulties Saudi students abroad have adjusting to a new culture and the strain of their studies offers some

critical conclusions. Saudi students must overcome several obstacles, such as linguistic, societal, and intellectual ones (Jameel et al., 2022). We developed the hypothesis below based on the well-established relationship between stress and adaptation among Saudi students studying in Malaysia. When faced with the challenges of adapting to a new culture, they may experience a variety of stressors, such as language barriers, social isolation, and cultural differences. These stressors can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychological symptoms, which can, in turn, impair academic performance.

**H1:** Students who experience more significant cultural adaptation challenges will also report higher levels of academic stress.

**H1a:** Students who experience more significant Language Adaptation challenges will also report lower levels of Academic Overload

**H1b:** Students who experience greater Language Adaptation will also report lower levels of Emotional and Psychological Stressors

**H1b:** Students who experience greater Communication Adaptation will also report lower levels of Academic Overload

**H1c:** Students who experience greater Communication Adaptation will also report lower levels of Emotional and Psychological Stressors:

**H1d:** Students who experience greater Daily Life Adaptation will also report lower levels of Emotional and Psychological Stressors and Academic Overload

**H1f:** Students who experience greater Daily Life Adaptation will also report lower levels of Emotional and Psychological Stressors:

#### 3.2. The moderating role of social support

This hypothesis suggests that strong social support networks may mitigate the negative impact of cultural adaptation challenges on academic stress. Social support can provide individuals with emotional comfort, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, which can help to buffer the effects of stress and promote academic success. Academic stress can be lessened by the negative consequences of cultural adaptation issues when friends, family, and university personnel provide social support. According to research, Saudi students studying overseas who received more social support from friends and family experienced less difficulty adjusting to a new culture and less academic stress (Jameel et al., 2022). According to another study, Saudi students studying overseas who had access to tutoring and counseling services were less likely to experience academic stress and difficulties adjusting to a new culture (Ladum and Burkholder, 2019; Ng et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2023).

**H2:** The availability of social support resources will moderate the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and academic stress.

#### 4. The study model

The study framework student’s academic stress as a dependent variable where cultural adaptation acts as an independent variable, and the moderator variable is proposed to be social support (Fig. 2). Academic overload and emotional and psychological stressors are the dimensions of students’ academic

stress, where cultural challenges are limited to languages, communication, and daily life adaptations. The moderator variable, social support, was measured using questions related to emotional and informational support. The analysis is performed using SPSS, analyzing a simple regression equation.

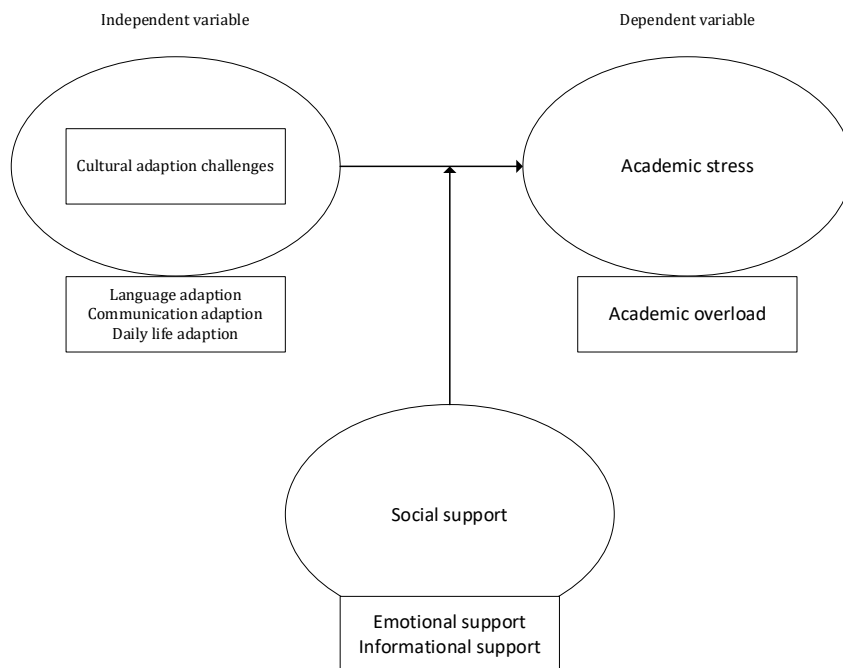


Fig. 2: Research framework

#### 5. Methodology

We used a questionnaire to collect data on students’ academic stress, cultural adjustment challenges, and social support. The measurement scales were adapted from prior studies. A Likert scale was employed to evaluate each item, with distinct items measuring each variable. Students’ academic stress was assessed using a scale based on Gadzella’s (1994) Student-life Stress Inventory. Furthermore, cultural adaptation challenges are categorized into three dimensions, namely language adaptation, communication adaptation, and daily life adaptation, following the framework proposed by Ward and Geeraert (2016), with a total of fifteen items to assess these categories. Social support is measured using ten items adapted from Zimet et al. (1988), commonly used in cross-cultural contexts. The proposed relationships were tested using PLS-SEM software. We built the survey using Google Forms, distributing the link to students enrolled in the Saudi Arabia scholarship program in Malaysia.

#### 6. Results

##### 6.1. Demographics

The study explores the intention of undergraduate students in government scholarship programs in Malaysia; the study concentrated more

on academic stress, cultural adaptation challenges, and social support. However, previous studies overlooked the importance of social support as a moderator in international students’ context. We have distributed the questionnaire to all undergraduate students under the government scholarship program via the database in the cultural attachment of the Saudi Arabia embassy in Malaysia, including the male and female sections. We have collected 150 responses, where 43% came from the Female side, and the remaining 57% came from the male side (Table 1). The proposed hypothesis showed that social support helped moderate the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and academic stress. This study examined the relationship between cultural adaptation and academic stress among international students, with social support as a moderator. Cultural adaptation challenges measured by communication and daily life adaptation positively and statistically significantly impact academic stress. This indicates that students’ academic stress levels increase as they face more difficulties adjusting to the new cultural environment. Social support, measured by emotional and informational support, negatively and statistically significantly impacts academic stress. This suggests that strong social connections and access to helpful information can help Saudi students abroad cope with the challenges of cultural adaptation and reduce their academic stress.

Languages barrier also has a positive and statistically significant impact on academic stress. This implies that language difficulties can exacerbate the stress associated with cultural adaptation and further hinder academic performance. The overall model fit is indicated by a high R-squared value

(0.752) and a statistically significant F-statistic ( $p < 0.001$ ). These findings suggest that the proposed model effectively explains the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges, social support, language barriers, and academic stress among Saudi students abroad (Table 2).

**Table 1: Demographics**

Feature	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Number of students
Age (Female)	20.5	0.707107	20	21	65
GPA (Female)	3.3	0.282843	3.1	3.5	65
Cultural adaptation challenges (Female)	3.7	0.141421	3.6	3.8	65
Academic stress (Female)	2.1	0.141421	2	2.2	65
Social support (Female)	4.25	0.353553	4	4.5	65
Age (Male)	23	1	22	24	85
GPA (Male)	3.533333	0.305505	3.2	3.8	85
Cultural adaptation challenges (Male)	3.866667	0.152753	3.7	4	85
Academic stress (Male)	2.633333	0.152753	2.5	2.8	85
Social support (Male)	3.533333	0.46188	3	3.8	85

**Table 2: Result of regression analysis**

Dependent variable	Independent variables	Coefficients	Standard errors	T-values	P-values
Academic stress (1-10)	Cultural adaptation challenges: Communication adaptation (1-5)	0.621	0.132	4.705	0.001
	Social support: Emotional support (1-5)	-0.283	0.125	-2.265	0.025
	Social support: Informational support (1-5)	-0.192	0.118	-1.627	0.105
	Cultural adaptation challenges: Daily life adaptation (1-5)	0.538	0.127	4.228	0.001
	Languages barrier (1-5)	0.315	0.112	2.808	0.006
	Constant	2.416	0.923	2.612	0.011

The study's conclusions have significant ramifications for both research and practice. In practical terms, the results imply that interventions to improve social support and lower obstacles to cultural adaption might help ease academic stress among Saudi students studying overseas. Furthermore, initiatives to raise Saudi students' language competency overseas may also lessen stress and enhance academic performance. The results of this study indicate that more investigation is warranted to elucidate the precise processes by which language proficiency and social support impact academic stress in foreign students. Future studies should also examine how obstacles to social support and cultural adaptation affect student well-being, such as mental health and acculturative stress.

## 7. Discussion

The study's conclusions have several significant ramifications for comprehending and resolving the difficulties encountered by overseas students. First, the results emphasize how critical cultural adjustment is to the academic achievement of overseas students. Academic success and reduced levels of academic stress are more likely for students who can adjust to the new culture better; this result is based on previous studies such as Restrepo et al. (2023). Second, the results imply that social support may be quite helpful in assisting foreign students in adjusting to their new culture and managing the pressures of their studies. Providing foreign students with socialization opportunities and peers, instructor, and staff assistance can enhance their academic performance and overall well-being, which is consistent with Liu et al. (2023), McLean et al. (2023), Restrepo et al. (2023), and Ullah et al. (2023). The particular processes by which social

support moderates the association between cultural adaptation and academic stress require more investigation. Further studies should look at the impact of additional variables on overseas students' academic achievement and ability to adjust to a new culture, such as personality qualities and coping mechanisms.

## 8. Conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of the link between academic stress and cultural adjustment among international students, revealing that social support can lessen the impact of cultural adaptation on academic stress. The findings highlight the importance of fostering social support networks for Saudi students studying abroad, suggesting that institutions should offer opportunities like cultural organizations, language exchanges, and mentorship programs to help students build connections. Additionally, providing resources such as tutoring, counseling, and workshops on cultural adjustment can equip students with the tools they need to succeed academically. Families and friends also play a crucial role by offering emotional support, companionship, and practical help. Overall, social support is key to helping Saudi students abroad overcome cultural adjustment challenges and maintain strong academic performance.

The findings of this study are based on a specific group of Saudi students studying in Malaysia. Since cultural, social, and institutional factors in Malaysia may differ from those in other countries, the results may not fully apply to Saudi students in other settings. The study also has limitations related to the sample size and diversity. Although efforts were made to include a variety of students, some subgroups may have been underrepresented, which

could impact the overall findings. The study relies on self-reported data for cultural adaptation, academic stress, and social support, which may lead to biases or inaccuracies. Furthermore, the measures used might not capture all aspects of these concepts, possibly limiting the understanding of their relationships. While the study emphasizes the role of social support in reducing academic stress, the effectiveness of specific support mechanisms (such as cultural organizations and language exchanges) may differ across cultural contexts, making it difficult to apply these findings to Saudi students in other countries.

The current study will benefit policymakers by acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by Saudi students overseas, allowing them to shape future plans, taking into consideration the results achieved. The study underscores the pivotal role of cultural adjustment in determining the academic performance of overseas students. It suggests that effective adaptation to a new culture positively correlates with academic success and lower levels of academic stress. Consequently, interventions aimed at facilitating cultural adaptation could yield substantial benefits in enhancing the educational outcomes of international students. The results highlight the importance of social support in assisting foreign students with cultural adjustment and academic pressures. By providing opportunities for socialization and access to supportive peers, instructors, and staff, institutions can create a conducive environment for international students to thrive academically and emotionally. These findings underscore the need for proactive measures to foster a sense of belonging and community among overseas students.

While the study establishes a connection between cultural adaptation, social support, and academic outcomes, it also acknowledges the complexity of these relationships. There is a call for additional research to delve deeper into how social support influences the association between cultural adaptation and academic stress. Exploring variables such as personality traits and coping strategies can provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics at play among international students.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The research followed ethical guidelines, and no risks were posed to participants.

### Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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