

Factors Affecting International Students' Academic Achievement in Azerbaijan

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| Keywords | Abstract |
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| Higher education international students academic achievement challenges Azerbaijan | The various challenges faced by international students have been investigated in most countries. However, this study was the first to investigate international students' challenges in their academic life in Azerbaijan and how their academic achievement is affected by academic, social, cultural, and psychological factors. Its purpose was to raise awareness of the problems of international students so as to contribute to the internationalization of universities by developing more appropriate strategies. This exploratory study applied a qualitative research design. It was determined that international learners' main challenges dealt primarily with attitude and communication, as well as academic factors. In-depth analysis yielded unexpected results: Whereas the academically satisfied students perceived academic factors as the main impactful factors affecting their academic achievement, for the academically unsatisfied students, psychological factors were more prominent. Moreover, the international students were not provided with efficient institutional supports and assistance to overcome challenges. This research is intended to catalyze future studies and help with developing more focused, purposeful, and solution-oriented approaches in this field. |

Introduction

The internationalization of universities necessitates research on the challenges faced by students who study abroad and how this affects their academic achievement.

Statement of the Problem

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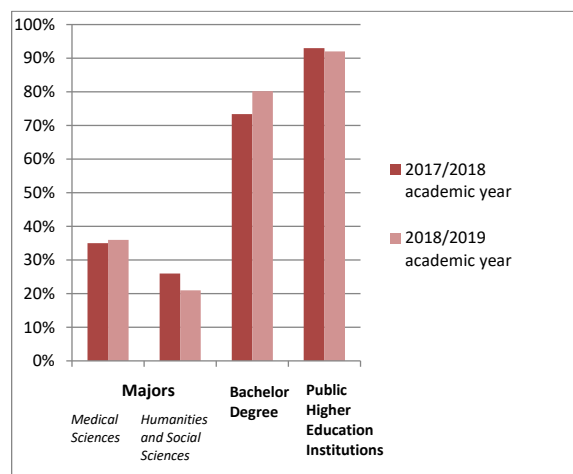
International students' challenges have been investigated from several aspects all over the world. Tas (2013) pointed out that related studies were “conducted as early as 1974” (p. 8). Yet, this issue has not been explored in-depth in Azerbaijan, and it is touched on only in the media. Ahmadova (2018) noted that international students in Azerbaijan confront problems such as communication, language barriers, well-being, transportation, climate change, and cultural differences.

Azerbaijan is also involved in the internationalisation of education, and related documents such as state programmes have been adopted to accelerate this process. It was emphasised that “as the prestige of higher education institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the world grows, in the future, their opportunities to attract foreign students and teaching staff independently should be expanded” (State Programme on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023, 2018, p. 6). This statement indicates that the proportion of international students in higher education in Azerbaijan has been increasing and requires an attentive and careful approach.

According to the annual reports of The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018; 2019), during the academic years 2017/2018, and 2018/2019, the international students' numbers studying in preparatory, bachelor's, master's, PhD, and residency programmes, were 5410, and 6004, respectively. In the 2018/2019 academic year, students came to Azerbaijan from a total of 86 countries, including Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Libya, and Kenya. The primary students' inflow was from Turkey, Iran, Russia, Georgia, and Iraq. The principal majors were in medical sciences, and humanities and social sciences. Studying predominantly at public higher education institutions, the majority applied to bachelor's degree programmes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Information about the International Students Studying in Azerbaijan



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The Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this qualitative research was to reveal the challenges international students face in their study life and explore how their academic achievements are affected by these challenges. It was also aimed to draw attention of and assist universities in formulating a more direct, solution-oriented approach for completing the international learners' study.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- What are the challenges faced by international students in their university life in Azerbaijan?
- How do international students perceive the effect of these problems on their academic achievement?

Significance of the Study

This research can be considered as the first scientific study conducted about international students' in Azerbaijan. The strength and uniqueness of this research are that it examined the difficulties of international students from four different perspectives (academic, social, cultural, and psychological) and identified the impact of these challenges on their academic performance. Moreover, using their perceptions, the factors which are likely to cause international students' dissatisfaction with their educational performance were determined.

Being familiar with international students' contemporary problems may enable academic staff to help them adapt and adjust to the new educational environment and complete their studies successfully. Learning about these challenges can help determine the reasons for the international students' academic dissatisfaction and develop more conscious policies for them to complete their studies successfully and for improving the quality of education. Moreover, the universities have an opportunity to turn it into an investment by enhancing their reputation and being promoted globally since each of the international students could represent these universities in their community. On the other hand, this research can help attract more international students by alleviating their challenges, which in turn would "help universities generate higher revenue in terms of tuition and other fees" (Wu et al., 2015, p. 2) and influence the country's economic growth. For instance, according to the Institute of International Education (2013), "in the fiscal year 2012-2013, international students contributed \$24.7 billion to the U.S. economy through tuition and other living expenses" (as cited in Gautam et al., 2016, p. 503).

All the listed facts and issues encouraged the present research on the challenges faced by international students in Azerbaijan and the factors affecting their academic achievements.



2. Literature Review

Researchers have always analysed international students' problems to develop a more reliable educational environment and provide adequate support to the students. While adjusting to the new academic environment, international learners face challenges regarding active involvement during lessons, participation in group discussions, interaction with teachers, and communication with tutors and advisers. They have to accept and adopt the new cultural norms, overcome social barriers, and withstand physiological influences. Further, newcomers have to cope with all these challenges to be successful, as their foremost goal for leaving their home would have been to study at one of the more globally prestigious and distinguished universities. At the same time, there's the need to not cause guilt or regret to their families as most of the time, parents of international students expend more financial assistance than those of the "domestic students", and overseas students "have more pressure to meet those expectations in a short amount of time" (Wu et al., 2015, p. 6).

International students' adjustment to the host countries predicts their academic performance and depends on motivation, adaptation, well-being, and self-efficacy. Bailey and Phillips (2015) argued that motivation stimulates academic achievement and intrinsic amotivation is associated with lower academic performance. The authors emphasised that "amotivation shows a reverse pattern of relationships" and that "meaning in life is closely linked to self-determined forms of motivation, which has implications for students considering their study options" (Bailey & Phillips, pp. 12–13). Khan et al. (2015) determined student confidence as a motivation tool in higher educational ambitions and academic performance. They also revealed that the factors of socio-cultural adjustment, self-efficacy, and gender considerably predict sojourners' educational performance.

Freeman et al. (2017) endorsed self-efficacy as a determinant factor in international students' academic performance and indicated it as a "reflection of their confidence in their own ability, their self-belief and personal competence which is an important driver toward international students' academic adjustment" (p. 133). Unlike Khan et al. (2015), Freeman et al. (2017) demonstrated that the socio-cultural adjustment factor has a minimum impact on international learners' academic adjustment. Freeman et al. (2017) conducted their research to identify the significant challenges faced by international students while adapting to Malaysia's educational environment. As the focus group students mainly came from the Asia, the socio-cultural distance between their recent study locations and their homes was minimal. The similarities between their own cultures and host cultures positively affected those students' adjustment and academic performance. Titrek et al. (2016) also remarked on cultural similarities and pointed out that several international students admitted that "most of them are Muslims and there are few challenges in the culture" in Turkey (p. 151). Yet, most overseas students encounter culture shock. "Culture shock is a sense of anxiety, depression, or confusion that results from being cut off from your familiar culture, environment, and norms when living in a foreign country or society" (Segal, 2019, para.



3). Wu et al. (2015) argued that international students have to tackle various communication patterns, signs, and symbols of the host society when they want to engage in a new environment. Most of the time, non-adaptation to the existing country's cultural norms leads to cultural alienation, which in turn causes homesickness, depression, and loneliness. McGarvey et al. (2015) described cultural alienation from the perspective of personal space, stating that "there was significant discomfort, and an awareness of the discomfort caused to others, in terms of acceptable closeness, such as how close to sit to another person, or physical contact with another person, such as hugging, shaking hands and kissing" (p. 6). They also noted that the students acknowledged that not accepting these treatments could be seen as discourteous or rude.

The other type of cultural difference occurs during the educational process. Academic culture shock is connected with the educational system, curriculum, teaching-learning environment, classroom structure, and assessment. International students encounter problems regarding misunderstandings with professors, test administrations, classmates' isolation, language barriers, test structure, and tutors' attitudes toward them. Going through transformative learning, newcomers find it challenging to overcome these difficulties, and consequently, their academic achievement becomes unsuccessful. A study about Chinese international students' school performance ascertained that although they went through preparation courses, the students still faced massive difficulties during classes, and the unproductive results influenced them physiologically, and they even thought that "the Chinese International preparation programs failed" (Liu, 2016, p. 7). Teaching and learning methods, professors' expectations, assessment, and activity forms differ across countries.. Cortazzi and Jin (2002) discussed academic cultural differences as follows:

British academic culture has an individual orientation. There is a degree of equality between individuals so that 'horizontal' relationships are emphasized. Students expected to develop as individuals with their own opinions; independence of mind, creativity and originality are valued. In contrast, the academic culture of the Chinese (and many other non-western groups) emphasises relationships. The collective consciousness of the group is important. Hierarchical relations obtain strongly between those who are older, senior or in authority, and those who are younger, junior or subordinate. (pp. 78–79)

The other vital barrier for foreign learners is language. Most studies have confirmed that a lack of proficiency in English has a powerful impact on students' academic achievement, interaction with classmates and professors, and socio-cultural adaptation. A pedagogical challenge associated with using English to quickly respond to questions, active participation, academic writing, pronunciation, and accurately expressing thoughts impacts international students' academic performance and, apparently, their educational assessment. Li et al. (2010) determined that "proficiency in English, and social communication with compatriots" were the most critical influencers on all international students' academic performance (p. 14). Lack of communication,



not understanding jokes, phrases, and expressions, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding caused by poor language knowledge lead to the isolation of overseas students from their peers and society. Therefore, they are directed to build compatriot relationships. Although some studies stress that foreign students were welcome in their community, for example, in Ireland and Turkey (McGarvey et al., 2015; Titrek et al., 2016), it was noted that host students also “need to develop intercultural competence to interact with international students” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 8). Baklashova and Kazakov (2016) concluded that host universities’ academic staff and students “should be aware of the increasing value of cross-cultural mobility and the special significance of international students’ effective integration in the new environment” (p. 1831). Studying the challenges of adjustment to university life in the United States, Tas (2013) stated that “educators must encompass both the U.S. and international students in promoting understanding about diversity” and “it can be planned to capitalize on its [diversity’s] benefits, not liabilities” (p. 7).

The problems discussed above do not cover all challenges faced by international learners, and there are several other related studies that have been conducted. Moreover, studying abroad helps students enhance their worldview, develop themselves, and expand their horizon of knowledge to meet the modern world’s needs. In turn, enriched student capability leads to more fierce academic competition between learners by catalysing the process. For instance, as Liu (2016) pointed out, the Chinese students who went through preparation courses may be an indicator of the fact that international students, at most times, are academically well prepared in advance before attending foreign universities. Consequently, all these factors trigger universities to expand their educational opportunities and develop more competitive institutional policies, including international students’ needs.

Considering the factors mentioned above, based on the international students; challenges this study aimed to examine the factors affecting their academic achievements in Azerbaijan from four main directions – academic, social, cultural, and psychological.

3. Methodology

The study investigated the challenges faced by international students studying in Azerbaijan and how their educational performances were affected.

Research Design

The research design fell under the umbrella of exploratory social research and implemented a cross-sectional study. An inductive reasoning approach was used to analyse data. The research was carried out through the following steps:

- I. Identify the international students’ main challenges



- II. Determine which type of factors are more impactful on their academic achievement (through the academic, social, cultural, and psychological types of challenges)
- III. Identify how the international students perceive their academic performance
- IV. Divide the international students into two groups according to their academic satisfaction level
- V. Compare the students' responses in both groups to identify the fundamental challenges which were more likely to prevent them from achieving academic success

Instrumentation

As “standardized questionnaires have an important strength in regard to measurement generally”, this instrument was used during the survey (Babbie, 2010, p. 287). The questionnaires started with an additional explanation about the research purpose and a statement guaranteeing anonymity. It was also mentioned that the collected materials would not be transferred to third parties and would not be used for any other purpose.

Upon the requests of a few Turkish students, as their English knowledge would not allow them to complete the survey correctly, the questionnaire was translated into Turkish as well. Therefore, the questionnaires were prepared in English and Turkish, and each was separately developed online. The links were shared among the students through the assisting universities' representatives and students. To better understand the influence level of the problems, the questions were collected in four groups with five questions specific to the relevant factors in each group: the academic part, the social part, the cultural part, and the psychological part. The international students were also asked to range these different parts' perceived impacts on their academic achievement by choosing between the options “none”, “low”, “a bit”, and “high”. A Likert scale was used for measurement. To state the extent to which they were satisfied by their academic performance, the students could choose one among the options “for sure”, “acceptable”, “somehow”, and “not at all”. At the end of the survey, they answered the questions related to their age, gender, university, and satisfaction level on their academic achievement.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

This study covered students who came to Azerbaijan from another country and studied in preparatory, bachelor's, and master's programmes. As the population consisted of international students studying in Azerbaijan, the study employed purposive sampling. The study sought to ensure the diversity of the educational environment and multi-nationality in the research. Therefore, it was intended to have the participation of international students from at least five other countries studying at no fewer than five different universities. The survey was conducted in Baku over two weeks via online questionnaires. The administrations of three randomly selected universities as well as students of other universities were asked to share the questionnaires via



email and telephone, respectively. Upon the completion of both English and Turkish versions, the answers from both were combined to obtain a single data source

Data Analysis

The data analysis was primarily inductive. The international students' challenges were defined according to their percentages.

To range the factor parts' impact levels, the options "none", "low", "a bit", and "high" were indicated as "0", "1", "2", and "3". This numerical data was entered into the computer for measurement, and for each part, overall points and other calculations were made.

After the initial results were determined, the data was divided into two groups according to the students' academic satisfaction levels to explore in depth the most impactful factors on overseas students' academic achievement: 1) the academically satisfied students (ASS), comprising the data of students who chose the options "for sure" and "acceptable" regarding the satisfaction about their academic achievement and 2) the academically unsatisfied students (AUSS), comprising the data of students who were "somehow" or "not at all" satisfied with their educational performance.

Validating the Findings

The questions primarily covered international students' challenges according to the studies presented in the literature review. The most frequent and challenging problems faced by international students worldwide were considered during the formulation of the survey, which in turn focused on the most crucial and common challenges in the questions.

Research Limitations

Because the participation of international students was limited, the findings cannot be generalised.

4. Findings

The study intended to identify the main challenges of the international students studying in Azerbaijan and determine the impact of these challenges on their academic achievement.

Overall, 50 international students participated in the survey. The study included international student participants studying at five different universities and who came from at least five different countries. Table 1 presents the respondents' demographics: 58% of the participants were female, and 42% of them were male; there were 76% of bachelor's, 18% master's, and 6% preparatory students; their age range was 18–34, and the average year was 22.4 years, but most of them were 24 years old; the participants were from 21 different countries studying at ADA University, Khazar



University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, Baku State University, and Baku Slavic University.

Table 1

Respondents' Information

| | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Gender | Male | 42% |
| | Female | 58% |
| Degree Programs | Preparatory course | 6% |
| | Bachelor | 76% |
| | Master | 18% |
| Ages | Rate | 18-34 years |
| | Average | 22.4 years |
| | Frequency | 24 years |
| Universities | ADA University, Khazar University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, Baku State University, and Baku Slavic University | |
| Countries | Kingdom of Bhutan, Italy, Russian Federation, France, Tajikistan, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, The People's Republic of China, Switzerland, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, USA, Sudan, Mozambique, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, and The Gambia | |

The International Students' Challenges

To identify and learn the most common challenges, 79 types of answers on four aspects were explored (see Appendix A for full responses). The data demonstrated that the significant challenges were attitude (mind's predisposition to particular ideas, values, and people) and communication, forming 54% and 47% of the participants' responses, respectively. Additionally, 36% of the participants declared that they sometimes felt nervous or tense during the lessons. With 35% of the responses, the curriculum was the main reason international students did not perform as well as they had in their hometown. The language barrier, with 35% of responses, was one of the most frequent problems faced by international students in the classes. The other 35% students' problems were speaking and interaction (see Figure 2).

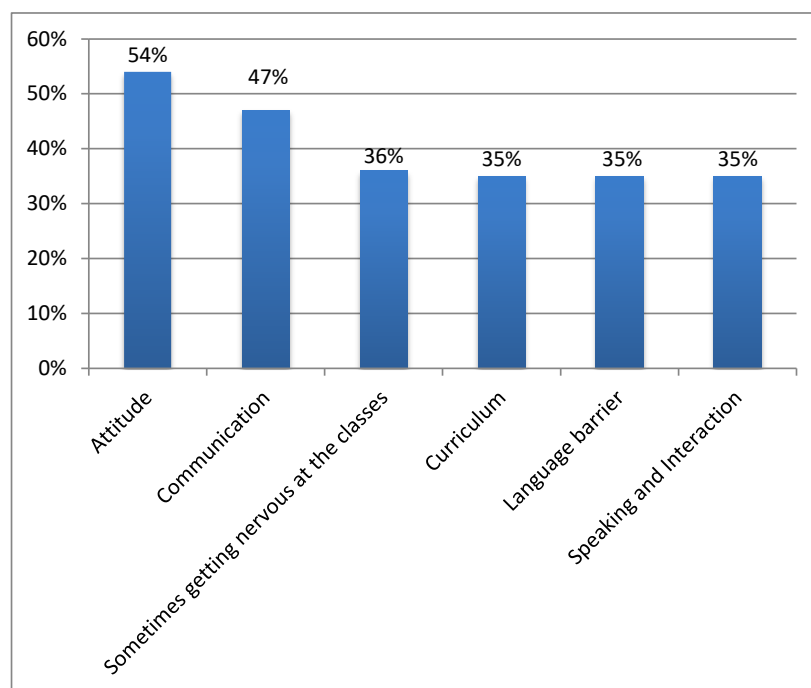
Figure 2

Most Frequent Challenges Faced by International Students



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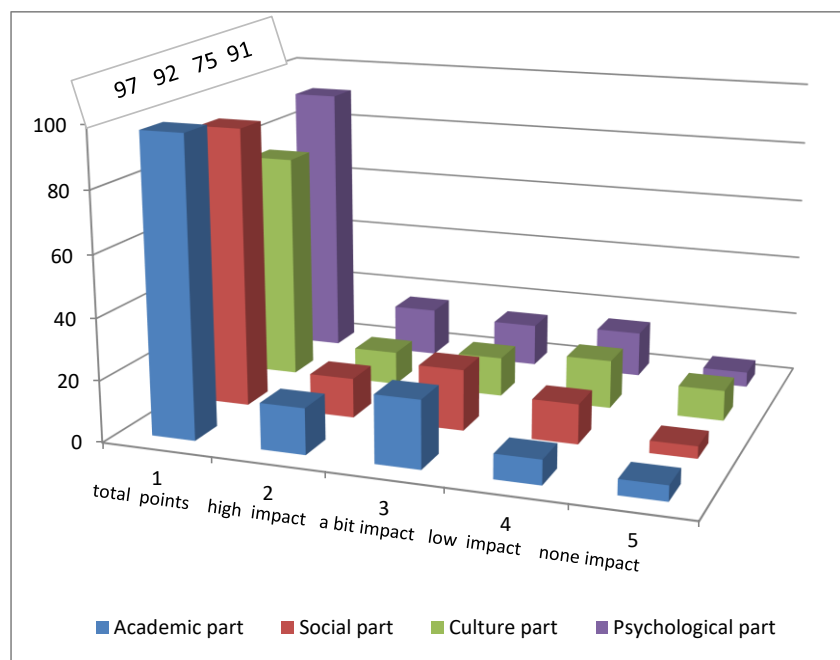
The international students claimed that they were extroverted persons (54%), motivated by their own goal (53%), and strong enough to cope with challenges by themselves (34%). Moreover, 50% of the participants stated that they preferred to spend their free time with other international students. The overseas students were also the most willing to help them with difficulties at the university.

The data (6% of responses) also demonstrated that the tutors were the last persons willing to help international students if they were in trouble at the university. Further, only 18% of respondents indicated that support services were helpful to the international students' adaptation, and high-level interaction with professors, classmates, and others (21% of responses) was the second motivation tool for the overseas students after their own goal.

Determination of the Parts' Impact

As the international students answered the questions, they stated how they perceived the different parts' impact on their academic achievement at the end of each part. The total impact points were calculated for each part to ascertain the most problematic part. With 97 points, the academic part was the most difficult one, and the cultural part was the least impactful with just 75 points. The ranking was accurate for the average impact points as well, indicated as follows: academic part – 1.94, social part – 1.84, cultural part – 1.5, and the psychological part – 1.82 (Figure 2). Moreover, the highest rate of the option “none” regarding the impact on the academic achievements was detected in the cultural part and the most frequent “high” effect was noticed in the psychological part (see Figure 3).



Figure 3*The Impact Rates of Various Parts*

The International Students' Academic Satisfaction Levels

The students were also asked to state how much they were satisfied with their academic achievement. 42% of them evaluated it as “acceptable”, 32% as “somehow”, 24% as “for sure”, and only 2% stated that they are “not at all” satisfied with their academic performance.

Grouping the International Students

The respondents were divided into two groups, namely ASS and AUSS, to understand how these factors impact international students' academic satisfaction levels. It was noted that 66% of the students were “satisfied” and 34% were “unsatisfied” with their academic achievement.

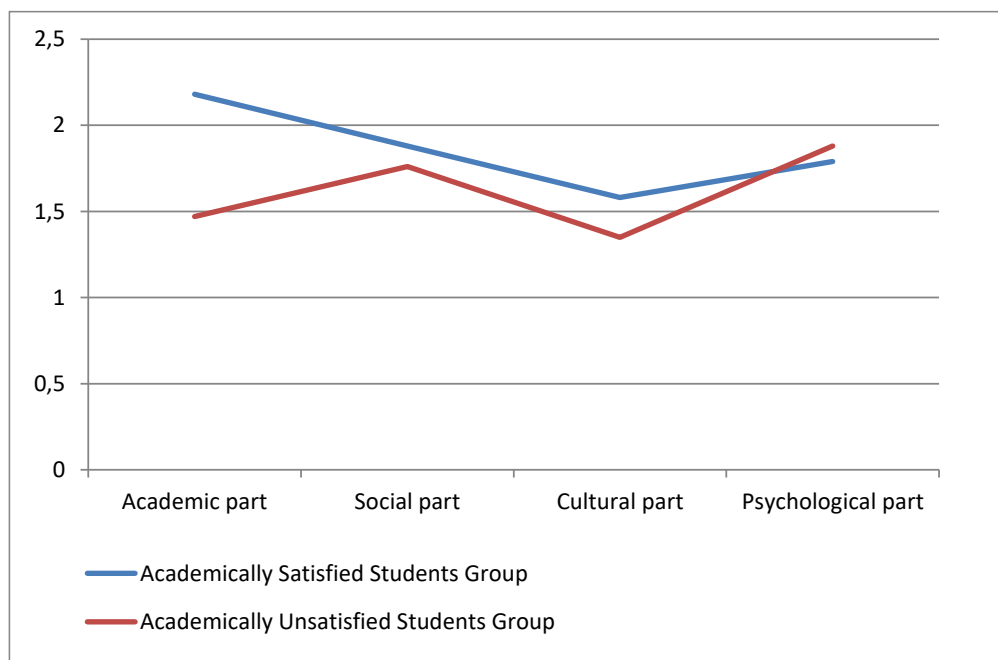
Comparison of the Groups' Responses

Subsequently, the academic, social, cultural, and psychological parts' average impacts were measured once more for each group, and the major differences in the responses were analysed. The ASS group's average impact points were 2.18 for the academic part, 1.88 for the social part, 1.58 for the cultural part, and 1.79 for the psychological part. The AUSS group's results were 1.47 for the academic part, 1.76 for the social part, 1.35 for the cultural part, and 1.88 for the psychological part (see Figure 4).



Figure 4

Groups' Perceptions to the Challenges' Impact on their Academic Achievement



Eight contrasting responses were compared for each part across the groups to examine how they challenge international students to succeed in their studies. Figure 5 illustrates the composition and comparison of the responses which were involved in the additional investigation. They are as follows:

- The academic part – Discrimination (0%–6%), language barrier (28%–50%), teachers' unsatisfied explanation (20%–31%), reading and finding enough resources (19%–29%), assessment (7%–20%), interaction (35%–20%), writing and expressing your thoughts (28%–21%), and expressing yourself (41%–6%).
- The social part – I have almost no free time (6%–12%), social activities (expenditure) (15%–6%), student associations (adaptation) (18%–12%), support services by universities (adaptation) (15%–29%), to stay alone (21%–12%), to join local social activities (24%–12%), be by myself (15%–35%), and to be with interational students (33%–18%).
- The cultural part – The local people ignore me (3%–13%), always need extra help (rules and regulations) (6%–18%), huge differences exist (interpersonal communication) (6%–25%), similarities more than differences (interpersonal communication) (13%–6%), problems related to timing (27%–44%), it is easy (rules and regulations) (33%–18%), it is hard to understand and follow, but I am trying (rules and regulations) (49%–23%), and local people try to help me with any type of difficulties (61%–31%).

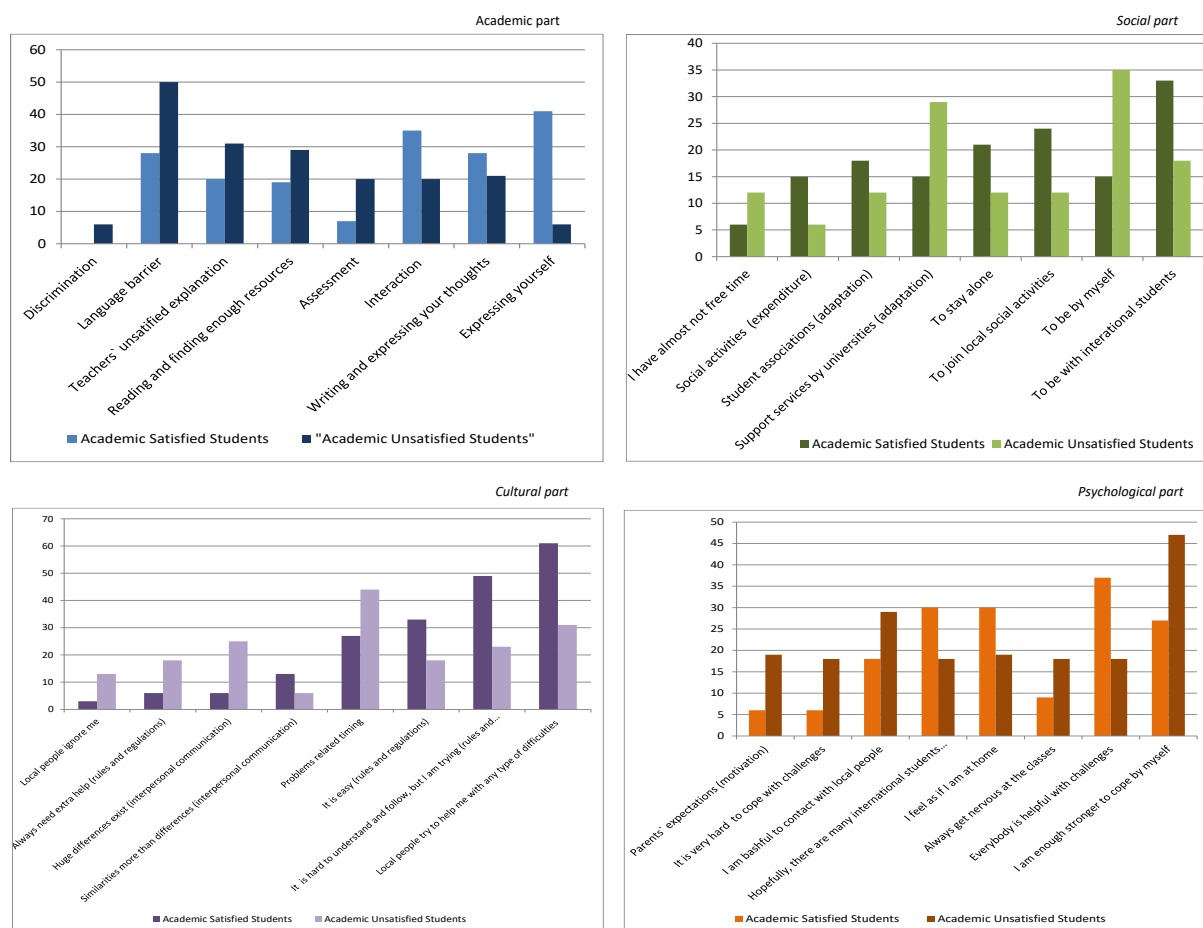


- The psychological part – Parents' expectations (6%–19%), it is very hard to cope with challenges (6%–18%), I am bashful to contact with local people (18%–29%). hopefully, there are many international students around to cope with challenges (30%–19%), I feel as if I am at home (30%–19%), always get nervous at the classes (9%–18%), everybody is helpful with challenges (37%–18%), and I am strong enough to cope by myself (27%–47%).

The results were thoroughly analysed and are discussed in the next chapter.

Figure 5

Responses' Comparison for the Parts



5. Discussion

This study aimed to find out certain information about the international students' challenges and which factors affect their academic achievement. The overseas students mainly suffer from problems related to attitude, speaking and interaction, curriculum, communication, and language



barriers. Even though academic issues are critical, the main reason for dissatisfaction with academic performance was noted to be psychological factors. The study also revealed that although international learners are motivated by the interaction with their teachers, their tutors and teaching staff are less helpful, and they do not receive enough support from universities.

The International Students' Challenges

Although only a small part of the participants stated that there were considerable differences in interpersonal communication between locals and their communities, the international students in Azerbaijan are significantly affected by the attitude factor. "When entering into a new culture, they needed to deal with different value systems, communication patterns, sign and symbols of social contact, and interpersonal relationship patterns" (Wu et al., 2015, p. 6). However, fortunately, cultural differences had the least impact on the international learners' educational performance.

"After the initial cultural shock, then the challenges shift to academic issues" (Gautam et al., 2016, p. 520). Khan et al. (2015) argued that sojourners' "successful adjustment in university setting in turn may possibly improve their academic achievement" (p. 156). Speaking and interaction was the most problematic section for overseas students. Liu (2016) noted that "Chinese international preparation programs failed because of lacking American curriculum, American instructional settings, American educators and so forth" (p. 7), and in Azerbaijan as well, the curriculum is also the main factor for the international students to not perform as high as they did in their hometown. Teachers' unsatisfactory explanations, not having enough teaching materials and interaction with teachers almost at the same level are problems for the students to comprehend lessons.

Most international learners stated that they were extroverted persons, yet communication challenged them more than other factors. With the language barrier's influence, they principally preferred to spend their free time with other international students. Therefore, interaction with peers was another frequent problem for them. Wu et al. (2015) stated that "difficulties in developing friendship with the domestic students" in turn lead to social isolation and loneliness (p. 6). Consequently, the participants who tended to stay alone in their free time and were less socialised were unsatisfied with their educational performance.

Overall, the international students studying in Azerbaijan were found to be goal-centred and well oriented to succeed, which is crucial for their future progression. According to Mikkonen et al. (2011), "students without clear future personal goals were less successful in putting good effort into their studies" (as cited in Sakurai & Pyhältö, 2018, p. 34). On the other hand, it is worth noting that more than half of the participants were motivated by their own goals, and their adaptation also mostly took its source from their own goal. Since "the self-determined motivation for studying abroad was negatively associated with culture shock" (Yang et al., 2017, p. 101), the overseas



students could “to meet the social and emotional challenges of university” (Bailey & Phillips, 2015, p. 11).

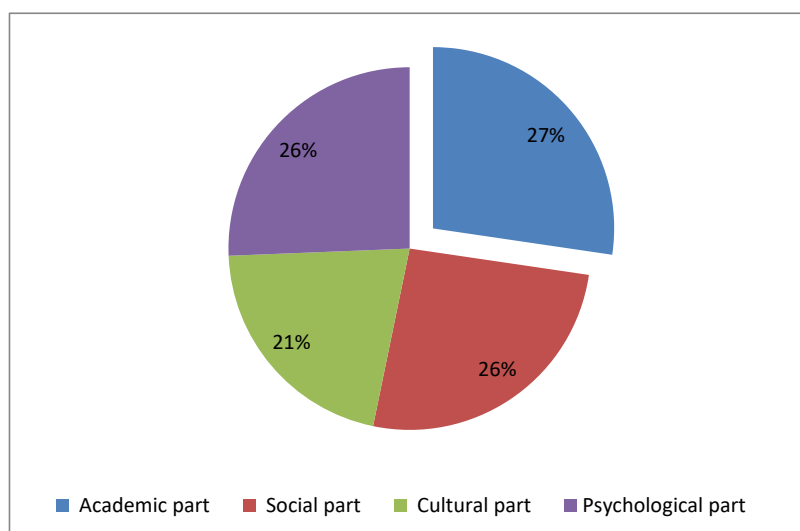
It was revealed that the connection between international students and the teaching or technical staff also plays a great role in the students’ motivation. Yet, support services and student associations cannot sufficiently help them with adaptation. Especially, tutors’ assistance in difficulties was noted to be on the lowest level. “The tutor’s role is essential to promote the development of the students” (Flores et al., 2012, p. 119), and their assistance and support are more helpful with institutional relationships as well as student performance. Therefore, strengthening relations between institutional staff and international learners may lead to more smooth integration and, in turn, more oriented, more encouraged, and highly successful students.

Determination of the Parts’ Impact

The challenges were analysed from four major perspectives – the academic part, the social part, the cultural part, and the psychological part. Bailey and Phillips (2015) claimed that “only academic adjustment was positively correlated with grade” (p. 6). Analysis of the data confirmed that although the factor parts’ impact rates were closer, the academic part had the highest and the cultural part had the lowest impact on the international students’ academic achievements (see Figure 6). Freeman et al. (2017) noted that “most international students face only a slight difficulty or may not face any difficulty in socio-cultural adjustment. In other words, they adjust fairly well from a socio-cultural perspective” (p. 132). The social and psychological parts demonstrated the same degree of influence.

Figure 6

The Impact Share of the Various Parts on the International Students’ Academic Achievement

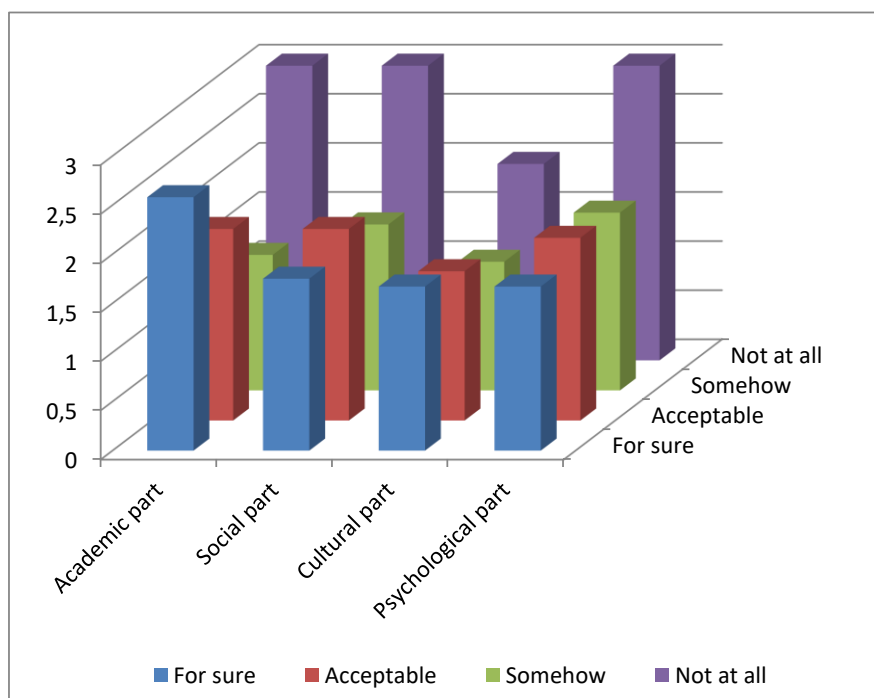


The International Students' Academic Satisfaction Levels

The analysis of the data revealed that most overseas students were grateful for their educational achievement, and only one person was “not at all” satisfied with it. Further, the results display that as students' satisfaction with their academic performance decreases, the impact of academic issues also diminishes (see Figure 7). Thus, it is evident that although educational factors are the most challenging, international students can get satisfied with their academic performance by focusing on them.

Figure 7

The Impact Rate of the Various Parts on the Students' Academic Satisfaction Levels



Grouping the International Students

The international students were grouped according to their perception of academic satisfaction into ASS and AUSS groups. It was revealed that most international students studying in Azerbaijan found themselves successful in education.

Comparison of the Groups' Responses



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To further improve student achievement, ASS and AUSS group responses were compared, aiming to identify factors that contribute to academic success/failure. The ASS group found the academic part the most challenging; the AUSS group mostly struggled with the psychological part. While both groups rated social factors equally, neither felt that the cultural issues affected their academic performance significantly.

The Academic Part

Given the important role that pedagogical settings play in students' learning (Sakurai & Pyhältö, 2018), it is not surprising that the ASS group struggled with expressing themselves in the lessons, both verbally and writing. Although this group also encountered problems in their interactions with peers, this did not discourage them from communication, which was largely successful. On the other hand, for the AUSS group, the language barrier was more impactful, as they were unable to understand their teachers and faced difficulties with reading and finding appropriate resources. As a result, these students perceived assessment as a reason for not performing as high as they did in their hometown more than the ASS group. Still, it is noteworthy that only one student (from the AUSS group) faced discrimination in the classes.

The Social Part

According to Freeman et al. (2017), social support is “the second most important factor influencing the academic adjustment of international students” (p. 133). This assertion is supported by the present study findings, as the ASS group mostly relied on student associations for adaptation, whereas, the AUSS group mostly sought support from services offered by their university. As a result, the latter experienced greater challenges, given that “the establishment of social supports and emotional connections is a primary indication” (Liu, 2016, p. 4) of academic success. In an earlier study, Pruitt (1987) similarly found that “a greater amount of interaction with host nationals has been associated with fewer academic problems (as cited as in Zhou et al., 2008, p. 70). Indeed, as a result of greater social interaction with their peers, students in the ASS group were more confident, which had a positive influence on their overall success. It is also likely that interaction with other foreign students further strengthened their self-confidence. Thus, even though the ASS group enjoyed spending time alone, students in the AUSS group were more likely to report feeling lonely in their free time, as they were less involved in local social activities.

The Cultural Part

The cultural part was the least impactful part for the international students' academic achievement, which is to be expected, given that Azerbaijani people are hospitable and strive to make foreigners feel welcome in their country. Nonetheless, the ASS group benefitted more from local people's warm attitude than the AUSS group did. Moreover, the AUSS group also confronted huge differences in interpersonal communication, which in turn, showed its impact negatively on their academic achievement. This could be an issue, given that McGarvey et al. (2015) pointed out that



“students from regions where cultural distance is greatest, reported more difficulties” (p. 12). Finding more similarities in interpersonal communication attenuated the effects of cultural diversity and helped the ASS group to be successful.

The Psychological Part

The psychological part had the highest impact on the AUSS group’s academic achievement. Freeman et al. (2017) showed that the link between the international students’ psychological adjustment and academic adjustment was positive and significant. Feeling isolated abroad and the high impact of parents on motivation may indicate that the AUSS group was more tied to the family. Moreover, the AUSS more frequently felt nervous and tense in the classes, which are also obviously important for their educational performance.

The AUSS group mostly believed in themselves and tried to solve the problems unassisted. In contrast, the ASS group mainly relied on other people’s support. Besides being surrounded by supportive local people, the ASS group also experienced other international students’ assistance more than the AUSS group. Further, the AUSS group was shyer to contact others, which very likely made it hard for them to cope with challenges.

All these listed factors indicate that the AUSS group was more sensitive, less supported, and could not deal easily with the challenges as the ASS group did. Wu et al. (2015) stated that “international students need guidance to succeed in their academic learning and their psychological stress should be supported” (p. 8). This guidance can help international students overcome psychological obstacles and accomplish their studies by focusing more on academic issues.

The current research attempted to explore the international students’ challenges and illustrate how their academic achievements were affected. The challenges cannot be covered in one study, and it needs a more comprehensive and in-depth investigation. Getting more acquainted with their problems can help further understand what factors affect overseas students’ academic achievement.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine the challenges faced by international students studying in Azerbaijan and the factors affecting their academic achievement. This research is not only the first scientific study to address the problem of international students in Azerbaijan; concurrently, it also the first to explore those students’ academic, social, cultural, and psychological challenges in one study. It was also determined how the international students assess the challenges and how these parts affect their academic achievement. To conclude, the following information was ascertained:



- The international students are mainly challenged regarding the factors of attitude and communication.
- They primarily suffer from academic factors, such as curriculum and language barrier.
- They confront culture shock very slightly, and their academic achievement is least affected by it.
- Social activities increase international students' academic performance.
- The majority of the international students are satisfied with their educational performance.
- The academically satisfied international students' educational performance is generally affected by academic factors.
- The academically unsatisfied international students are mainly challenged with psychological issues;
- Universities' assistance and support to the international students are not satisfactory.

The students who are conscious of the challenges could withstand the problems by developing stress-coping strategies and relevant social skills. However, some students are profoundly affected by psychological influences and, apparently, need more support to accomplish their academic objectives. Thawabieh (2016) stated that if the educational institutes took care of the psychological factors that impact the students' academic achievement, it would improve their productivity.

Based on the results, the study proposes some recommendations as follows:

- To reduce psychological tension, tutors and other related staff could periodically engage in conversations with international students.
- International students could be involved in the local social activities more frequently for increasing their adaptation and adjustment to the new environment as well as for developing communication skills and overcoming the language barrier as well.
- An International Student Alumni Network could be created for allowing newcomers to get in touch with their compatriots when they need their opinion.
- International Students Day (17 November) can be a tool to collect international students altogether and strengthen their connectedness;
- Teachers must give more attention to the teaching of lessons and ensure that the lesson is mastered by each student as well as be more careful in their interaction with international students.
- A more modern classroom structure and curriculum that covers the active participation of groups and the interaction of teachers and peers could be developed.



- More attention could be given to the buddy system to promote its implementation; or a national support programme could be created to provide the international students with the necessary information and assistance during their studies in Azerbaijan;
- Support services and related departments' staff, especially tutors, must be competitive, more prepared, and sensitive to the international students' needs and possible instances of misunderstanding for helping the students overcome psychological obstacles.

Internationalisation of higher education forces universities to create a more multicultural and comprehensive learning environment. Townsend (2012) stated that “there is recognition that education need not be a competitive process, but instead world’s best practice should be freely shared for the benefit of all” (p. 52). The problems of international students must be considered and addressed to meet modern requirements and create a more favorable educational environment. The current study is just one approach to examining this problem; there may be other more direct or comprehensive studies and investigations for identifying and resolving the overseas students’ issues. I hope that this study launches a new approach to the international students’ challenges and trigger discussions to constitute a better learning community for all in higher education.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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Declarations of interest

None



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