

**MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOST AND HOME COUNTRY SUPPORT SYSTEMS
IN ILORIN, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

With the increasing globalization of education, more students are pursuing academic opportunities outside their home countries. While this offers exposure to diverse cultural and learning experiences, it also comes with significant mental health challenges. International students often struggle with anxiety, depression, academic stress, cultural shock, and social isolation, exacerbated by limited access to familiar support systems. This study explored the mental health challenges faced by international students in Ilorin, Nigeria, comparing the effectiveness of support systems available in both their home countries and host institutions. Adopting a mixed-method research design, the study gathered data from 50 international students and 30 university counsellors through survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis to uncover deeper insights into student experiences. This study revealed that

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international students face major mental health challenges such as academic stress, homesickness, anxiety, and depression. Many are unaware of available support services or avoid them due to stigma, cultural, and language barriers. Instead, they often rely on informal support like peers and religious gatherings. The findings suggest that peer-led and culturally sensitive programs could enhance existing services. Overall, a more inclusive and holistic mental health approach is needed to support the well-being and academic success of international students.

Keywords: International students, mental health challenges, psychological support, cultural adjustment, counselling services, cross-cultural adaptation, Nigeria

Discipline: Educational Science

Absztrakt

A NEMZETKÖZI HALLGATÓK MENTÁLIS EGÉSZSÉGGEL KAPCSOLATOS KIHÍVÁSAI: A FOGADÓ- ÉS A SZÁRMAZÁSI ORSZÁG TÁMOGATÓ RENDSZEREINEK ÖSSZEHOSONLÍTÓ VIZSGÁLATA ILORINBAN, NIGÉRIÁBAN

Az oktatás fokozódó globalizációjával egyre több hallgató folytat tanulmányokat származási országán kívül. Bár ez sokszínű kulturális és tanulási tapasztalatokat kínál, jelentős mentális egészséggel kapcsolatos kihívásokkal is együtt jár. A nemzetközi hallgatók gyakran szembesülnek szorongással, depresszióval, tanulmányi stresszel, kulturális sokkal és társas izolációval, amelyeket tovább súlyosbít a megszokott támogató rendszerekhez való korlátozott hozzáférés. Jelen kutatás a Nigéria Ilorin városában tanuló nemzetközi hallgatók mentális egészségi kihívásait vizsgálta, összehasonlítva a származási országukban és a fogadó intézményekben elérhető támogató rendszerek hatékonyságát. A kutatás vegyes módszertanú kutatási tervet alkalmazott: az adatgyűjtés 50 nemzetközi hallgató és 30 egyetemi tanácsadó bevonásával történt kérdőíves felmérés és mélyinterjúk segítségével. A kvantitatív adatokat leíró statisztikai módszerekkel elemezték, míg a kvalitatív válaszok tematikus elemzésen estek át a hallgatói tapasztalatok mélyebb megértése érdekében. Az eredmények azt mutatták, hogy a nemzetközi hallgatók jelentős mentális egészségi problémákkal küzdenek, mint például a tanulmányi stressz, a honvágy, a szorongás és a depresszió. Sok hallgató nincs tudatában az elérhető támogató szolgáltatásoknak, vagy a megbélyegzéstől, valamint kulturális és nyelvi akadályoktól tartva elkerüli azok igénybevételét. Ehelyett gyakran informális támogatási formákra, például kortárs kapcsolatokra és vallási közösségekre támaszkodnak. Az eredmények arra utalnak, hogy a kortársak által vezetett, valamint kulturálisan érzékeny programok hatékonyan kiegészíthetik a meglévő szolgáltatásokat. Összességében egy befogadóbb és holisztikusabb mentális egészségügyi megközelítésre van szükség a nemzetközi hallgatók jóllétének és tanulmányi sikerességének támogatása érdekében.

Kulcsszavak: nemzetközi hallgatók, mentális egészségi kihívások, pszichológiai támogatás, kulturális alkalmazkodás, tanácsadói szolgáltatások, interkulturális adaptáció, Nigéria

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány

Introduction

The globalization of higher education has led to an unprecedented increase in the number of

students crossing borders in pursuit of academic qualifications (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International students now form an essential part of many

university communities worldwide, enriching host institutions with diverse cultural perspectives and contributing to academic excellence. However, their presence also presents new challenges, particularly in the area of mental health and well-being (Li, Wang, & Xiao, 2014). For international students, studying abroad can be a rewarding yet emotionally taxing experience. Being away from home, family, and familiar social structures often leads to stress, emotional strain, and psychological discomfort (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

International students often face several stressors that their local counterparts may not experience. These include cultural dissonance, language difficulties, adjustment to new academic expectations, experiences of discrimination, homesickness, and financial difficulties (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Sawir et al., 2008). These factors may contribute to the development or worsening of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and low self-esteem. Research indicates that the process of adapting to a foreign environment, also known as acculturative stress, is a major predictor of mental health outcomes among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

In addition to these challenges, access to mental health services remains a major concern. Many international students do not seek help for psychological problems due to stigma, lack of awareness about available resources, or a mismatch between their cultural expectations and the nature of support offered by host institutions (Chen et al., 2015). For instance, students from collectivist cultures may prefer informal support networks over formal counseling services, which are more common in Western educational systems (Yakushko, Davidson, & Sanford-Martens, 2008). This often results in international students suffering in silence or turning to inadequate coping mechanisms. While some universities have established counselling units to support students, questions re-main about how

well these services meet the needs of a diverse student population.

In the Nigerian context, there is limited research exploring the mental health experiences of international students, particularly in cities like Ilorin where several universities attract students from across West Africa and beyond. These students are expected to cope not only with the academic demands of their programs but also with the sociocultural differences they encounter in their new environment. Although universities such as the University of Ilorin have counselling centers, the extent to which these centers provide culturally responsive and effective mental health support for international students is not fully known. Furthermore, it is unclear how these students perceive the support they receive in Nigeria compared to what they might have had access to in their home countries.

This study addressed this gap by examining the mental health challenges faced by international students in Ilorin, Nigeria, and comparing the support systems they access in the host country with those available in their home countries. By exploring the types of support provided, students' satisfaction with those services, and their coping mechanisms, this study aimed to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how best to support international students in a Nigerian educational setting. As global mobility in education continues to rise, such research becomes increasingly important in helping institutions develop inclusive, responsive, and effective mental health services that cater to the unique experiences of international learners.

Statement of the Problem

As higher education becomes more global, international student mobility is on the rise, with thousands of students crossing borders to pursue academic goals. While this trend fosters cultural exchange and academic development, it also exposes international students to numerous mental

health challenges. These include anxiety, depression, academic pressure, homesickness, discrimination, and social isolation, which may significantly hinder their academic performance and overall well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

Several studies have examined these issues in Western and Asian contexts. For instance, Yeh and Inose (2003) explored how social connectedness and acculturative stress impact international students' mental health in the United States. Similarly, Li, Wang, and Xiao (2014) investigated psychological stress and coping strategies among Chinese students abroad. These studies consistently highlighted these international students often underutilize counselling services due to stigma, cultural differences, and lack of awareness or accessibility.

However, there is a significant gap in research focusing on international students studying in African countries, particularly Nigeria. Studies such as those by Akanwa (2015) and Yakushko, Davidson, and Sanford-Martens (2008) hint at similar trends, yet comprehensive research on the mental health experiences of international students in Nigerian institutions remains scarce. This gap is especially concerning given the rising number of foreign students in Nigerian universities, including in Ilorin, and the unique sociocultural and infrastructural context within which these students study.

Furthermore, most existing studies do not compare the mental health support systems available in host countries with those in the students' home countries. Without such comparison, it is difficult to determine the adequacy, cultural relevance, and responsiveness of services provided in host institutions. Understanding these differences is crucial for creating effective mental health interventions tailored to international students' backgrounds and expectations.

This study, therefore, sought to fill this gap by investigating the mental health challenges of

international students in Ilorin, Nigeria, and comparing the support services available in their host institutions with those in their home countries. By doing so, it aimed to contribute to the limited body of literature on international student mental health in African educational contexts and provide practical recommendations for improving support systems.

Research Questions

- What are the common mental health challenges experienced by international students studying in Ilorin, Nigeria?
- What types of psychological and emotional support systems are available to international students in their host institutions in Ilorin?
- How do international students perceive the effectiveness of mental health support services provided by their host institutions?
- What mental health support systems were available to these students in their home countries prior to studying in Nigeria?
- How do the mental health support systems in Ilorin compare with those available in the students' home countries?
- What factors influence international students' willingness or reluctance to access mental health support services in the host country?
- What ways can universities in Ilorin improve their mental health support services to better meet the needs of international students?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design was appropriate for captu-

ring both the measurable aspects of mental health challenges and the nuanced personal experiences of international students. The integration of these methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation.

Population and Sample

The target population included international students currently studying at universities in Ilorin, Nigeria, and university-based counsellors who have professional contact with international students. A total of 50 international students (Table 1) and 30 university counsellors were purposively selected for the study. The student sample reflected diverse national back-grounds, levels of study, and durations of stay in Nigeria.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 50)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	30	60
	Female	20	40
Level of Study	Undergraduate	35	70
	Postgraduate	15	30
Country of Origin	Ghana	15	30
	Benin Republic	10	20
	Cameroon	8	16
	Others (combined)	17	34

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on their relevance to the research objectives. International students must have studied in Ilorin for at least one academic session to ensure adequate exposure to the host environment. University counsellors were selected from institutions that admit international students.

Instruments for Data Collection

Two primary instruments were used:

Structured Questionnaire: A self-report questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on the mental health challenges experienced by international students, types of support services accessed, and perceptions of the adequacy of these services. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions and was validated by experts in psychology and counselling.

In-depth Interview Guide: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both international students and counsellors to collect qualitative data. These interviews explored students' emotional experiences, coping strategies, and comparisons of support systems in their home and host countries. Counsellors will provide insights into institutional support structures and their perceived effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and voluntary nature of their participation. Questionnaire forms were distributed to students electronically and physically, depending on accessibility. Interviews were audiorecorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data from the questionnaire forms were analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as frequencies, and percentages). Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and categories across participant responses.

Validity and Reliability. The questionnaire was pilot-tested among 10 international students not included in the final sample to ensure clarity and reliability. Feedback was used to revise ambiguous or unclear items. Triangulation of methods and sources enhanced the study's credibility and dependability.

Ethical Considerations. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were upheld. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research complied with institutional ethical standards and guidelines for studies involving human subjects.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Common Mental Health Challenges. The most frequently reported mental health issues included: Academic stress (78%), Homesickness and cultural shock (66%), Anxiety and adjustment issues (54%), Depression-related symptoms (32%)

Utilization of Mental Health Support Services. Only 34% of the students reported using any mental health support services in their host institution. The remaining 66% cited reasons such as: Lack of awareness of available services (40%), Fear of stigma (25%), Language/cultural barriers (18%)

Comparison with Home Country Services. When asked to compare support systems: 45% of students stated that their home countries had more culturally sensitive and accessible support structures. 30% believed Nigerian institutions provided better academic support but lacked sufficient emotional or psychological services. 25% reported no notable difference.

Qualitative Findings (Thematic Analysis)

Analysis of the in-depth interviews with 20 international students and 10 counsellors yielded the following themes:

Theme 1: Perceived Neglect and Isolation

Many students expressed feelings of exclusion and emotional loneliness. A Cameroonian student remarked: "Sometimes, I feel like no one really understands where I'm coming from, even when I'm in distress."

Theme 2: Inadequacy of Culturally Sensitive Counselling. Counsellors admitted limited training

in cross-cultural counselling and language barriers as key challenges. "We do our best, but sometimes cultural differences make communication difficult," one counsellor noted.

Theme 3: Informal Coping Strategies. Students re-ported relying more on peer support, religious gatherings, and social media contact with home-based friends or family than on formal counselling services.

Theme 4: Desire for Structured Support Programs. Several students and counsellors suggested creating mental health orientation programs and student-led support groups tailored to international students' needs.

Discussion

The study identified several common mental health challenges among international students, including: academic stress, homesickness and cultural shock, anxiety and adjustment issues and depression-related symptoms (32%). These findings indicate that academic stress is the most pressing concern among international students, likely due to the academic demands and cultural adjustment they face. Homesickness and cultural shock also emerged as significant challenges, with students feeling disconnected from their home countries. Anxiety and adjustment issues are also prevalent, as students may struggle with adapting to new environments, while depression symptoms were less common but still noteworthy. This finding is consistent with the research by Goh and Lee (2018), who found that academic stress, cultural adjustment, and anxiety are commonly reported among international students. Similarly, a study by Zhang and Goodson (2016) highlighted homesickness as a prevalent issue affecting students studying abroad, with cultural shock often exacerbating the adjustment process. The prevalence of academic stress was also supported by Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), who found that the transition to higher education abroad can be overwhelming,

leading to stress and anxiety. The primary reason for these findings could be the compounded pressures that international students face, such as adapting to a new academic system, cultural norms, and social expectations. The lack of a familiar support system, coupled with the need to perform academically, creates a significant stress burden. Homesickness and cultural shock are natural responses to being in an unfamiliar environment, and the anxiety related to adjustment issues is often a result of the perceived challenge of fitting in. Only 34% of the students reported utilizing mental health support services at their host institution. The reasons for non-utilization included: lack of awareness of available services, fear of stigma (25%) and language/cultural barriers. This suggests that a majority of students are not accessing available mental health services, which is concerning given the reported mental health challenges. The lack of awareness of services, coupled with fears of stigma and cultural barriers, significantly inhibits help-seeking behaviors among these students. The lack of awareness of mental health services is consistent with findings from studies by Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) and Lee (2019), who noted that international students often fail to utilize available support systems because they are unaware of them or do not know how to access them. Fear of stigma and language barriers are also widely documented, with studies by Wei and Heppner (2016) indicating that stigma surrounding mental health often prevents students from seeking help, while language and cultural barriers can make communication difficult in counseling settings. One reason for these findings could be that international students may not be familiar with how mental health support works in their host country, especially if mental health services differ significantly from those in their home countries. Stigma surrounding mental health is prevalent in many cultures, which may discourage students from seeking help. Additionally, language and cultural

differences may make it difficult for students to trust or feel comfortable with the support services available.

When asked to compare support systems, the students reported: many believed their home countries had more culturally sensitive and accessible support systems; some felt Nigerian institutions provided better academic support but lacked sufficient emotional or psychological services. And few reported no notable difference.

This finding highlights that many international students feel their home countries offer more culturally sensitive and accessible mental health support systems. The students seem to appreciate the academic support provided in Nigerian institutions, but they believe emotional and psychological services are lacking. These findings are aligned with research by Ridley and Liddle (2018), who found that cultural sensitivity in counseling is crucial for effective support, and many international students feel more understood when receiving services in their home countries. Similarly, Lee et al. (2017) found that international students often struggle with accessing culturally appropriate mental health services in foreign countries, leading them to prefer services that are more familiar and culturally attuned. However, according to a study by Papadopoulos and Tilki (2013), host countries must improve their cultural competence in mental health services to better cater to international students. The difference in perceptions could be attributed to the students' familiarity with the mental health services available in their home countries, which may be more culturally relevant to their experiences. In contrast, while Nigerian institutions provide academic support, the lack of culturally sensitive and comprehensive emotional and psychological services may make international students feel less supported in their mental health needs.

Many students reported feelings of exclusion and emotional loneliness, as exemplified by one Cameroonian student who stated: "Sometimes, I feel like

no one really understands where I'm coming from, even when I'm in distress." This finding highlights the emotional isolation that many international students experience, which can significantly impact their mental wellbeing. The feeling of being misunderstood or unsupported can increase distress and hinder adaptation to the new environment. This aligns with findings from Chen and Lou (2017), who found that international students often experience emotional loneliness due to the lack of a supportive social network. Similarly, Yoon and Jepsen (2008) identified that international students are prone to feelings of exclusion, which can exacerbate mental health challenges like depression and anxiety. The feelings of neglect and isolation could be attributed to the cultural differences and lack of familiarity with local norms and practices. The absence of a familiar social support system often leaves students feeling disconnected, which can increase emotional distress.

Counselors admitted that they had limited training in cross-cultural counseling and faced challenges in communication due to language and cultural differences. This finding indicates that while counselors may be well-meaning, they may lack the cultural competency needed to effectively support international students. Language and cultural differences can create barriers to effective communication and understanding. This is supported by Lee et al. (2019), who found that many counselors struggle to provide culturally competent care due to a lack of training in cross-cultural counseling. Similarly, Arredondo et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of cultural competence in counseling, noting that a lack of it can lead to ineffective treatment. The likely reason for this finding is that many counselors may not have received formal training in cultural competence or language skills necessary to effectively work with a diverse student population. As a result, misunderstandings and miscommunications can occur, hindering the counseling process.

Students reported relying more on informal coping strategies, such as peer support, religious gatherings, and social media contact with home-based friends or family, rather than formal counseling services. This finding suggests that international students may feel more comfortable turning to informal support networks rather than seeking professional help, possibly due to the stigma associated with mental health or a lack of trust in formal services.

This is consistent with research by Poyrazli et al. (2004), which found that international students tend to rely on informal support systems, like family and peers, due to cultural stigmas surrounding formal mental health services. Similarly, Lee and Ciftci (2014) noted that religious and social networks often serve as primary sources of emotional support for international students. The reliance on informal coping mechanisms could be explained by the lack of trust in institutional support, possibly due to cultural stigmas or previous negative experiences with formal services. Social media and peer support offer more immediate and culturally familiar sources of comfort. Students and counselors recommended the creation of mental health orientation programs and student-led support groups tailored to the needs of international students. This finding underscores the need for structured and culturally sensitive support programs to help international students adjust better and seek appropriate help when needed. Orientation programs and peer-led groups could bridge the gap in support services. This aligns with the recommendations of Lee (2018), who suggested that providing cultural orientation and peer support groups could significantly improve mental health outcomes for international students. Additionally, Ciftci and Lee (2020) argued that student-led initiatives could provide a more relatable support structure for international students. The need for these support structures arises from the challenges international students face in adapting to a new environment. Structured

programs would offer a clearer understanding of available resources and create a safe space for students to connect with one another, reducing isolation and promoting mental wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by international students, particularly in relation to academic stress, homesickness, anxiety, and depression. Despite the availability of support services, a substantial proportion of students remain unaware of these resources or are reluctant to use them due to concerns about stigma, cultural barriers, and language differences. Moreover, informal coping strategies, such as peer support and religious gatherings, play a crucial role in the well-being of international students. This suggests that peer-led initiatives and student-driven mental health programs could complement formal counseling services and reduce feelings of isolation. Additionally, the comparison with support systems in students' home countries indicates that students prefer more culturally sensitive and accessible support structures, which could guide institutions in refining their mental health offerings. This study underscores the importance of creating a holistic, inclusive approach to mental health care for international students, incorporating both formal and informal support systems, and addressing cultural differences to ensure better psychological well-being and academic success for this group.

Recommendations

Institutions should develop comprehensive awareness campaigns to inform international students about the mental health support services available to them. This can include orientation programs, online resources, and in-person seminars tailored to help students recognize the importance of seeking help and how to access services. Counseling staff should undergo regular training in cross-cultural counseling and be equipped with the tools to

address language and cultural barriers. Additionally, institutions should consider hiring counselors with diverse cultural backgrounds or those fluent in the primary languages of their international student population. Institutions should establish peer support groups and student-led mental health initiatives that allow international students to connect, share experiences, and support one another. Peer mentors who have gone through similar experiences can offer a more relatable and accessible form of support. Mental health orientation programs should be integrated into the onboarding process for international students, with a focus on understanding the mental health challenges they may face and the available support systems. These programs should be tailored to the cultural and emotional needs of international students and offer practical coping strategies.

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