

Challenges and Coping Strategies of Sri Lankan Undergraduates in Non-English-Speaking Countries: A Qualitative Exploration Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory

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Abstract

International students pursuing higher education in foreign countries are vulnerable to numerous challenges diminishing their experience. Presently, research is dominated by the perspectives of Western students and English-speaking countries; neglecting the perspectives of international students in non-English speaking countries. Through Schlossberg's transition theory, this qualitative study explored the perspectives of South Asian, specifically Sri Lankan, students in the challenges faced and the coping strategies used – to ultimately develop recommendations improving student experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on eight undergraduates consisting of six women and two men studying in non-English-speaking countries varying from Eastern Europe to Middle Eastern nations. During Thematic Analysis three themes emerged: the role of host country language, discrimination experienced, and how challenges were navigated. Role of language emerged as a significant theme that influenced students' daily experiences and quality of support provided. Additionally, Sri Lankan students demonstrated agency by developing and maintaining strong social support systems. However, institutions must ensure that international students are provided adequate resources to navigate the challenges they face and encourage intercultural interactions.

Keywords: Internationally mobile students, Sri Lanka, undergraduates, challenges

Introduction

International students, referred henceforth as internationally mobile students (IMS), are individuals that physically cross the borders between their origin country and host country for educational purposes. It is a popular option for higher education that exposes one to new opportunities as well as challenges. Existing literature demonstrates that IMS experience numerous sociocultural, psychological, academic, and economic struggles (Hao et al., 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Students of marginalised communities are at increased risk of discrimination (Hunter-Johnson, 2022). Oduwaye et al. (2023) recognised the significance of English for IMS regardless of host country. However, students in non-English speaking countries (NESC) face further challenges when inexperienced with the native languages of the country (Yang, 2020) thus associating language with sociocultural difficulties (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Despite this, sufficient knowledge of NESC is lacking as IMS literature is dominated by the perspectives of students in English-speaking countries (ESC) (Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Sri Lanka (SL) is a South Asian nation with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. The choice to study abroad is influenced by flexible and high-ranked foreign education systems to local universities (Weeraratne et al., 2022). Few studies explore the perspectives of South Asian, particularly Sri Lankan, IMS. Recently, Pabodha and Abeywickrama (2021) explored the perspectives of Sri Lankan undergraduates in ESC and Ranabahu and De Silva (2024) explored the acculturation of postgraduates from SL in Japan. However, there is an existing literature gap regarding the experiences of undergraduates from non-Western countries studying in NESC.

To explore their perspectives, the study applied the Transition Theory by Schlossberg (2011). The theory highlights challenges faced by adults when transitioning to new experiences. Within the theory, students moving to higher education is an 'anticipated transition' wherein they can prepare for the transition beforehand (Schlossberg, 2011). Additionally, it consists of the '4S' system of coping; the situation, support, strategies, and self-resources that highlight reasons underlying one's behaviour during transition. The situation are elements surrounding transitions such as one's level of control over the scenario. Support consists of different social support whereas self are the personal resources at one's disposal. Finally, strategies are the methods used to cope such as changing the situation or stress reduction. It is considered an individualistic theory due to its roots in counselling (Musamali, 2018) however, this facilitates identifying barriers amongst individuals and is applied in similar studies exploring student behaviours when navigating challenges (Hunter-Johnson, 2022; Li & Lee, 2024). The present study aimed to contribute to the identified literature gap by answering the question: how do Sri Lankan undergraduates perceive their experiences in non-English-speaking countries? The study developed recommendations by exploring challenges and coping strategies utilised by Sri Lankan IMS.

Materials and methods

A qualitative study was designed to explore the perspectives of Sri Lankan undergraduates in NESC. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an interview guide developed beforehand. Eight participants were recruited through purposive sampling using social media. The inclusion criteria required Sri Lankan undergraduates above age 18 and conducted their secondary education in SL, which increased sample homogeneity and ensured their experience with Sri Lankan culture. NESC countries were qualified using the United Kingdom's classification of ESC (Government Digital Service, n.d.). Students that studied outside SL for secondary education, are studying in ESC, or postgraduate education were excluded. Four female participants were in Belarus, three participants were in Russia of whom one was male, and one male participant was in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Seven participants were medical students whereas the student in UAE studied computer engineering. Initially, ethical approval was granted from the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology on behalf of Liverpool John Moores University. Due to a physical proximity between participants and researcher, interviews were conducted online through video-conferencing platforms. To ensure privacy, participants and the researcher conducted it in private rooms. Firstly, information sheets, a consent form, and demographic information sheet was provided. Once obtaining consent, the interview began and was audio-recorded with their knowledge. Interviews were navigated using an interview guide. Participants may stop the interview and be directed towards support resources if they felt distressed. Upon concluding, participants were debriefed with mental health resources. The recordings are only accessible to the researcher and destroyed within 12 months of concluding the research.

Transcription of recordings was conducted using a denaturalised approach, ensuring a focus on the informational content of the interviews. To protect confidentiality while controlling one's own representation, participants decided on their pseudonyms. Additionally, identifying information was removed during transcription. Through meticulous revisits, each detail of the interviews were transcribed to protect validity. Finally, analysis was conducted through Thematic Analysis. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data. Then, initial codes were generated and revised. Next

themes were developed through the codes and then reviewed before being defined and named. Finally, after multiple revisions, the write-up began.

Within the context of the study, the researcher has travelled, but not studied abroad. However, this allowed them to analyse the perspectives through an objective lens. Additionally, their identity as a Muslim woman may have affected responses from men and those from other religious backgrounds hence, non-verbal nodding and utterances were used to encourage interest throughout the interview.

Results

During analysis, three overarching themes emerged. Using excerpts, they are presented below as the role of language, racial discrimination, and navigating challenges. Navigating challenges was further divided into two sub-themes: social support and institutional support.

The role of language identified English as the primary language used inside universities. Classes were commonly segregated from domestic students studying in the native language. Mandatory language classes by universities and translator apps were primary resources to navigate the language barrier – allowing students a sense of independence. However, such barriers with staff affected access and quality of facilities available. Moreover, translation quality of facilities may impact students psychologically: *“I’m not a bad student. I’m not just like taking a long time to read. I’m not dumb for med school. I’m just reading really difficult books because the translation is bad”* (Hannah, 1890-1892).

Outside the university, communication barriers affected daily life and access to financial and medical resources. Additionally, the barrier influenced medical students’ academic experience in hospitals. The inability to communicate fluently in the native language influenced interactions with the local population; one participant noted that it sometimes resulted in negative interactions as it further differentiated them from the locals. Additionally, a participant contemplated that the willingness of locals to communicate in English was associated with the relationship between NESC with ESC. Contrastingly to the experiences of Europe, the significant influence of English-speaking immigrants contributed to the integration of English in the UAE.

Participants studying in Europe experienced discrimination associated with their South Asian identity: *“Unfortunately we are South Asians and there is a sort of stigma that is associated with South Asians”* (Sahana, 3000-3001). Contrastingly, their Sri Lankan identity mitigated discrimination – negative perceptions of South Asia were occasionally overridden by positive perceptions of SL. These positive perceptions were due to perceived positive student behaviour and the status of SL as a popular travel destination for Europeans.

When navigating challenges, friends played a significant supportive role. Group formation was initially controlled by nationality and proximity before changing due to personal values and interactions. Relationships with domestic students were absent due to a lack of shared classes and language, thus reducing students’ access to culture-specific information. However, rarely, interactions with them were facilitated through shared religions. Rather, relationships were commonly with other international and Sri Lankan students. For medical students, competition either encouraged them to assist others or impaired relationships – thus reducing social and psychological resources. In this circumstance, a participant relied on her friendships back in SL. However, participants highlighted the importance of friendships with other Sri Lankans due to their shared identity. Interestingly, this was limited by an intragroup language barrier where deeper connections were hindered by inability to speak the dominant group language: *“When you speak in Sinhala like a native it’s like you will get more their vibe. For me it’s really hard to get a friend like that.”* (Sakshi, 4000-4002).

Student unions were a significant form of support consistently praised by each participant. Sri Lanka-specific unions developed a sense of community. They organised cultural events, communicated with universities, and provided financial, legal, and medical assistance. Support however, was influenced by societal norms. Dominant gender roles had mixed impacts on students. For instance, expectations of gentlemanly behaviour in the host country provided women with a sense of security.

However, within the IMS demographic women may be deemed emotional and given fewer opportunities: *"I would have to work twice as hard simply over the fact that I am a female student. Female medical student."* (Sahana, 3309-3310).

Comparatively, psychological support provided by groups were hindered by social expectations of masculinity obstructing men from expressing vulnerability. This was influenced by both cultural expectations amongst the IMS community as well as societal standards in the host country: *"Men should be strong. If you are weak or something, then you can't survive here"* (Pasindu, 2573-2574).

Perspectives towards institutional support varied. It was typically provided by universities through union funding and mandatory classes to familiarise students with language and culture. However, the mere existence of institutional support is insufficient. The quality of support provided had a significant impact on student experiences. To illustrate, although psychological help is without cost, the help some participants receive is hindered by the language barrier. This impacted willingness to seek help: *"People like find it really hard to seek help here ... because there is no therapist who would communicate with you in English."* (Aria, 720-722).

Moreover, some medical students reported avoiding psychological help for fear of being blacklisted; knowledge of this process was ambiguous yet worrying enough to discourage help-seeking. It was also noted that psychological help was affected by the social stigma of the host country. Additionally, students expressed differing views on feeling welcomed on campus with some desiring more inclusivity. In fact, a participant noted that efforts towards inclusivity were merely surface level:

"They try but their inclusivity is... surrounded or impacted by the fact that this is their country. They're just like 'oh we have to be, so we are.' But there is no real connection there. And because of that it kind of ... makes international students uh very kind of worried ... about the possible issues that might arise. So um they can... language barriers they can reduce it, they can genuinely reduce it they just don't try." (Sahana, 3366-3371).

Participants dissatisfied with institutions had negative appraisals and little confidence in the system:

"I don't know how to put it, but I simply don't care. Like I don't care that the uni ... , doesn't care about their students that much. Like I'm just gonna get my degree and go, that's it." (Hannah, 2263-2265).

Discussion

This study explored the perspectives of Sri Lankan undergraduates in navigating the challenges they face in NESC. Through the Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 2011), the findings developed recommendations in improving international students' experiences.

Language emerged as a significant challenging factor. Supporting existing literature, English was commonly used by IMS in NESC (Oduwaye et al., 2023). An important finding was the impact of language barriers on quality of existing support systems. Oduwaye et al. (2023) recognised that language in NESC is associated with sociocultural difficulties one may face. The present study demonstrates that such barriers further impact the quality of facilities provided by institutions thereby impacting the resources students use. The presence of institutional assistance may depend on the institution for American IMS in China recommended the implementation of language lessons (Yang, 2020), dissimilar to the participants. Classes were also absent in ESC (Hao et al. 2024) and postgraduate experiences (Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024). In Yang (2020), the institution paired American IMS with Chinese peers. However, their concerns were inverse to the experience of the participants: losing a sense of independence and 'annoying' their peers. Hence, a preferable solution is implementing them simultaneously. Parallel to ESC (Hunter-Johnson, 2022; Oduwaye et al., 2023), discrimination was

identified depending on their national and racial identities. Thus, highlighting the role of nationality in discrimination. Interactions related to language in ESC was based on accents (Oduwaye et al., 2023), and communication anxiety (Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021); however, this study noted that inability to communicate with the local language influenced interactions.

Of the 4S system, social support emerged as a vital resource influencing other resources. Cipolletta et al. (2021) identified that IMS moving from collectivist to individualistic cultures had less perceived social support. Although perceptions of support varied due to intragroup conflict, every participant in the present study noted the importance of social support. Cipolletta et al. (2021) however, did not differentiate between domestic or international group support. Within the present findings, support was primarily obtained by other IMS, particularly other Sri Lankans; thereby demonstrating the impact of one's national background, an aspect of the 'self' resource (Schlossberg, 2011), on social support. Consistent with Ranabahu and De Silva (2024), intragroup support from other Sri Lankans decreased need for socialisation with domestic students. This countered the experiences of American IMS (Yang, 2020) due to institutional attempts to intertwine cultures. Dissimilar to the aforementioned study, absence of domestic peers obstructed participants from accessing culture-specific information. Institutions may implement programmes to 'pair' domestic and international students in the first year; such programmes would allow both demographics to gain a holistic educational experience.

Few studies previously explored institutional help for students (Oduwaye et al., 2023) however, San and Guo (2023) found that both social and institutional support strongly facilitate postgraduate international students' adaptation and improve academic performance in China. With the present study, it highlights the need for institutions to reassess their facilities. Although some participants reported strong support from other IMS, a novel finding was the presence of intragroup language barriers – future research may explore intragroup differences. The study is not without limitations as participants primarily identified as female and more participants had Sinhala language fluency than Tamil – reducing ability to adequately infer gender and intragroup language differences. Additionally, student responses may be affected by immediate circumstances and events; underlining the need for longitudinal designs in IMS literature (Hao et al., 2024). Furthermore, perspectives were skewed towards Eastern European countries and medical students. Future studies could obtain larger sample sizes.

Conclusion

This study explores the experiences of non-Western IMS in NESC. The results highlight the community and agency students demonstrate by developing strong support systems for their peers as well as the inadequacies of institutional support due to language barriers in NESC. Institutions should reassess their facilities to account for diverse IMS and encourage intercultural interactions.

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