

**CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC
UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD**



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MANAGEMENT
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY ISLAMABAD
PAKISTAN
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
MS of Educational leadership and managements

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2025

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

Mubarak Ali Hugur declares that this thesis, titled "*Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration of International Students at the International Islamic University Islamabad*," is my original work. This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in Educational Leadership and Management at the International Islamic University, Islamabad. I confirm that this work has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other institution.

Signature: _____

Mubarak Ali Hugur

SUPERVISOR’S CERTIFICATE

The thesis titled “*Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration of International Students at the International Islamic University Islamabad*” was submitted by Mr. Mubarak Ali Hugur Regd. No. 61-FOE/MSELM/F23 is the partial fulfillment of the MS degree in Educational Leadership and Management at the International Islamic University, Islamabad, which has been completed under my guidance and supervision. I am satisfied with the quality of the student’s research work and allow him to submit this for further processing as per IIUI rules and regulations.

Supervisor _____

Dr. Abdurahman Alajlan

Associate professor

DEDICATION

This thesis extends special thanks to all academics who have explored the lives and struggles of people facing migration. May the lessons from this work encourage universities everywhere to become more supportive and inclusive towards international students

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, **Dr. Abdurahman Alajlan**, for his invaluable guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback throughout this research. I am also grateful to the international students at IIUI who generously shared their experiences, making this study possible. Special thanks to my family and friends for their unwavering support and prayers during this academic journey.

Abstract

This study examines the cultural adaptation and social integration of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), highlighting the academic, social, and emotional challenges they encounter. Guided by Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975), the research aims to identify key cultural and social obstacles, assess the effectiveness of current institutional support systems, and propose strategies to enhance cultural adaptation and social integration. A qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of international students. A purposive sample of 20 students (13 male, 7 female) was selected to ensure gender balance and capture diverse perspectives across faculties and academic levels. This sampling method intentionally engaged "information-rich" participants who had firsthand experience of the phenomenon under study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Inductive Thematic Analysis. The analysis revealed five major themes: language barriers, culture shock, difficulties in forming friendships, psychological and emotional stress, and financial pressures. The study concludes that international students at IIUI face significant challenges in cultural adaptation and social integration, with the most pressing issues being language barriers, culture shock, and social isolation. These challenges are exacerbated by inadequate institutional support and limited opportunities for peer engagement, negatively impacting both academic performance and emotional well-being. To address these issues, the study recommends implementing a dual-language support course (in Urdu and English) during the first semester, creating a comprehensive international student handbook, improving orientation programs, and offering culturally sensitive counseling and opportunities for peer interaction. Additionally, the absence of structured and culturally responsive institutional support further complicates these challenges.

Keywords: *International students, cultural adaptation, social integration, phenomenological research, student support, IIUI.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) attracts a culturally diverse student population from around the world, contributing to a rich and globally oriented academic environment. However, despite the benefits of this diversity, international students often face significant challenges in adapting to unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts. These include difficulties in navigating Pakistan's educational structure, understanding local customs, managing essential services such as accommodation and healthcare, and adjusting to new social norms.

In recent decades, higher education has experienced a remarkable rise in student mobility across national borders. Universities around the world now welcome students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, creating vibrant but complex learning environments. For international students, studying abroad offers opportunities for academic growth, cultural exchange, and personal development. However, it also presents challenges, such as adapting to new cultural norms, building social connections, and navigating unfamiliar institutional systems.

In Pakistan, the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) stands out as one of the leading institutions attracting students from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. Its unique religious and cultural orientation, combined with an international student body, makes it an important setting for studying how students adapt culturally and integrate socially. My interest in this topic arises from observing the diverse student community at IIUI and noticing differences in how students engage with academic life, develop friendships, and adjust to the local culture. This study is not only about identifying the difficulties faced by international students but also about exploring how these challenges shape their adaptation and integration experience.

1.1 Background of the study

International students contribute significantly to universities' academic and cultural diversity worldwide, bringing various perspectives that enhance the learning environment. However, their transition to a foreign university often comes with challenges that affect their academic performance, social integration, and mental well-being. Studies have shown that international students frequently encounter difficulties related to cultural differences, language barriers, unfamiliar academic systems, and managing day-to-day logistics like accommodation, healthcare, and visa requirements (Zhou et al.,2008). These challenges can be particularly pronounced in countries like Pakistan, where students may encounter even more pronounced cultural and linguistic differences.

In IIUI, international students meet different challenges, including learning about local ways, studying in the Pakistani education system and finding essential student services. While there are some resources at the university to assist students, there is a large gap in the availability of dedicated information for international students. This resource plays a key role in helping these students fit in, as it can be rough at first to find their way in a foreign environment without the proper help. It has long been recognized that helpers in universities confirm that it benefits international students when they help with cultural and social integrations. Students from overseas in IIUI face various problems such as dealing with foreign cultures, learning local customs and establishing friendships with other students. Tackling these challenges helps facilitate their change and makes them feel like they belong. The research by Glass, Buus, and Braskamp (2013) showed that easy-to-use support systems help international students adjust to cultural and social life, thereby enhancing their experiences at school. When IIUI supports activities that help new students

adapt to the culture and society, the campus becomes more welcoming and meets its goal of promoting global education.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

While there is extensive literature on international students in Western contexts, there is limited understanding of the experiences of those studying in Pakistan. As Pakistan aims to enhance its position as a higher education destination, it is crucial to comprehend the adaptation and integration processes of these students. This research addresses the gap in context-specific evidence regarding the challenges faced by international students at IIUI, a university characterized by its unique Islamic and multicultural identity. The findings will help inform policies and practices that ensure these students feel welcomed, supported, and empowered to thrive both academically and socially.

1.3 Problem of the Study

International students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) face various challenges that can hinder their academic performance and social integration. These challenges include linguistic and communication difficulties, cultural adaptation issues, academic navigation and adaptation, systemic and administrative barriers, and personal and emotional resilience. While IIUI provides some student services, there is currently no comprehensive, user-friendly guide specifically designed to address the unique needs of international students. The absence of such a resource often leaves international students struggling to find the information and support they need to adjust smoothly to life at the university. Without a structured, easily accessible source of information, international students may experience confusion, isolation, and stress, which can negatively affect their academic success and overall well-being. Research has shown that international students benefit greatly from dedicated handbooks and orientation resources tailored

to their needs, as these resources provide vital information that helps them transition more easily into their new academic and cultural setting.(Andrade et al., 2013) Therefore, the lack of International Students' guidelines at IIUI presents a significant gap in student support services, This study aims to better understand the experiences of international students at IIUI by identifying the key cultural and social challenges they face. It will explore how these challenges affect their ability to adapt to the local culture and integrate into the university community. Additionally, the study will recommend targeted institutional strategies to enhance their overall academic, social, and personal experiences.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to highlight the challenges faced by international students, providing them with a platform to share their experiences. It may lead to initiatives that enhance their social lives, academic involvement, and sense of belonging. The findings can inform policy development, improve support services, and elevate IIUI's global reputation, making it a more attractive and supportive destination for international students. By understanding the cultural and social challenges faced by international students, faculty can adapt their teaching and mentorship methods, thereby fostering greater classroom engagement and mutual understanding. The study can provide insights for higher education policy in Pakistan, contributing to national strategies focused on internationalization and intercultural competence.

1.4 Objectives

1. To identify the key cultural and social challenges faced by international students studying at the International Islamic University, Islamabad
2. To analyze how the challenges faced by international students affect their cultural adaptation and social integration within the university environment.
3. To recommend targeted institutional strategies that can enhance international students' cultural adaptation and social integration at IIUI.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What challenges do international students face regarding cultural adaptation and social integration at the International Islamic University Islamabad?
2. How do these challenges affect their cultural adaptation and social integration?
3. What institutional strategies can be developed to improve international students' adaptation and integration?

1.6 Research gap.

Most existing studies on international students concentrate on Western countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. (Brunsting et al 2018). In contrast, research within the South Asian context is limited, particularly in Pakistan, where empirical studies on cultural adaptation and social integration are rare. Few studies have explored these issues in a religiously and culturally diverse institution, such as the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). This research addresses that gap by offering insights from a non-Western, Islamic higher education context, thereby enriching the global discourse on international student experiences.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses on understanding international students' cultural adaptation and social integration at the International Islamic University Islamabad. It is specifically delimited to exploring the experiences, challenges, and needs of international students at IIUI. The scope is confined to IIUI and does not extend to other universities or educational institutions, ensuring a targeted and context-specific analysis of these students' cultural and social experiences.

1.8 Operational definitions

1. Cultural adaptation in this study means how much international students at IIUI fit in with the traditions, values, and customs of the host country and university. It means getting familiar with local traditions, knowing what is appropriate in society, and reflecting this in their behavior, but still holding on to their cultural traditions.
2. Social integration refers to how international students at IIUI develop important connections and a feeling of belonging among their peers. It means creating relationships with classmates, joining various groups, and being active in school activities. For this study.
3. International students refer to individuals studying at IIUI from nations other than Pakistan and representing diverse backgrounds. These students deal with problems distinct from other students because of their new environment.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

The primary model used to investigate how International Students at IIUI adapt and fit in is Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975). It points out that academic and social involvement boosts students' chances of doing well and staying in school. Tinto explains that the way students belong to their surroundings depends on how easily they can handle the challenges they find in their new environment. For international students at IIUI, the theory suggests that their overall

success depends significantly on how well they integrate into the academic community and adapt to their new surroundings' cultural and social expectations. This integration fosters a supportive environment that promotes personal growth and academic achievement.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975) and has been updated to reflect the specific realities of international students at IIUI. While the original theory highlights academic and social integration as key factors for student retention and success, the current framework explicitly includes cultural and social challenges, such as language barriers, culture shock, social isolation, economic pressures, and accommodation issues as the starting point of the adaptation process. Institutional support, represented by initiatives like orientation programs, counseling services, language assistance, and peer mentorship, is positioned as a central facilitator that directly influences both cultural adjustment and social integration. These, in turn, lead to better outcomes in academic achievement, psychological well-being, and a stronger sense of belonging. This update makes the framework not only theoretically solid but also practically relevant, addressing the lived experiences of international students in a non-Western, Islamic university environment.

1.10 Key Components of Tinto's Student Integration Theory

Academic Integration: Involves the student's ability to meet academic expectations, engage with the learning process, and feel supported by faculty and academic resources.

Social Integration: Refers to the student's ability to build meaningful relationships with peers, feel included in the social environment, and adapt to cultural differences.

Institutional Support: The institution's role in providing structured support systems, such as orientation programs and student handbooks, helps ease the transition for international students and supports their integration.

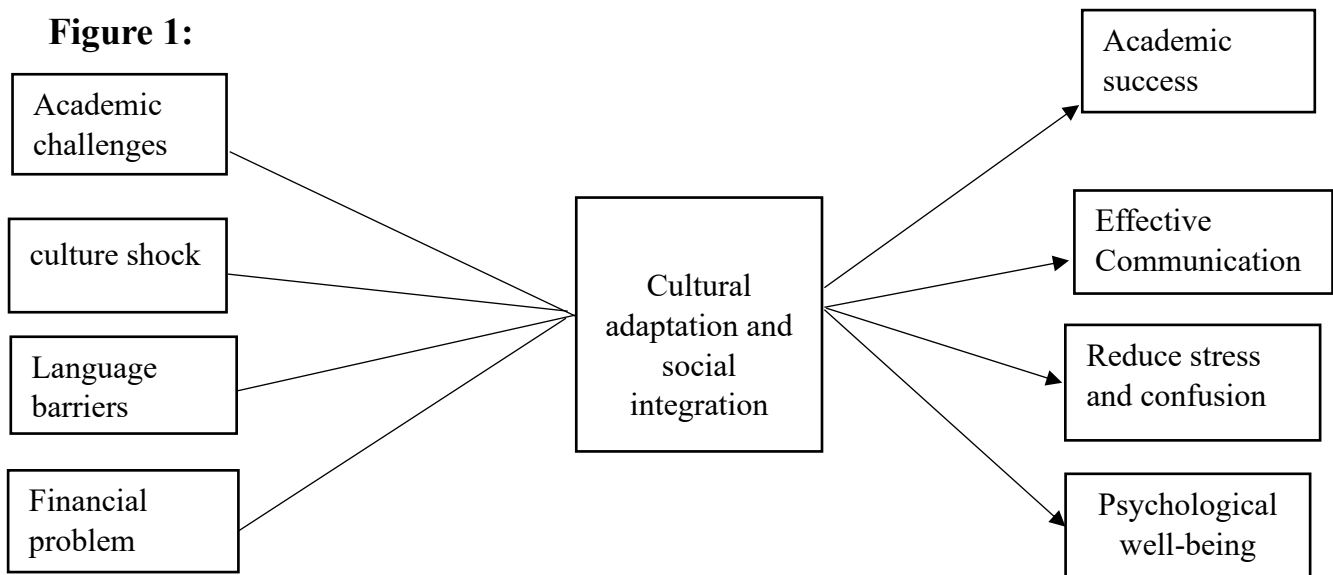
By using Tinto's framework, this study underscores the critical role that institutional support systems, such as handbooks and orientation programs, play in facilitating the integration of international students into the academic and social fabric of the university. These resources ensure students are better equipped to navigate academic expectations, cultural differences, and administrative processes.

1.11 Conceptual frameworks

The study relies on a framework that connects the challenges faced by international students with the help they receive to integrate into the social and cultural environment of IIUI. The theory by Tinto is the base for the framework, so it calls for schools to provide help for various challenges, which include academic hurdles, changes in culture and social problems, by offering additional support. Orientation programs and culturally sensitive ideas are ways these mechanisms strive to improve how students feel at school. Through this process, students are expected to perform better at school, integrate well with local peers, adapt smoothly to the culture, and have a better psychological experience, which all contribute to their success at IIUI.

1.12 Conceptual Framework of Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration

Figure 1:



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 introduction

The necessity for international students to culturally adapt and integrate into society has emerged as a significant research topic alongside the growth of global education. Relocating to a new country and culture for studies can be quite challenging for international students. Adjusting to a new learning environment, navigating social customs, overcoming language obstacles, and addressing psychological issues are just a few examples (Andrade, 2006). These barriers are particularly evident for international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), as they might struggle to align with local culture, academic traditions, and the available support services. This literature review centers on the social and academic challenges faced by international students at IIUI, primarily focusing on their cultural adjustment and engagement with the local community. It examines how students adapt in various educational settings and identifies the factors that contribute to their success. The review also assesses how orientation programs and initiatives that address cultural differences impact students' adaptation to college life. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and resources available to international students at IIUI, facilitating the development of strategies to enhance their overall experience and support.

2.2. Pre-arrival challenges

International students may experience various challenges before arriving in the country which make it difficult for them to adjust at first. Trying to get visas and paperwork for immigration can stress people out since the documents and rules might be hard to understand. Students often find it hard to get accommodation settled early, because they might not be aware of the kinds of

accommodation available, what is safe and how much it all costs. Financial planning is challenging as well, since many students find it hard to grasp the total cost of living abroad which consists of tuition, living expenses and health insurance. In support of this, Sherry et al. (2010) state that SED can have lasting effects. Students also struggle with cultural issues, especially when they find it hard to feel comfortable with different social practices and languages. As more is expected from their courses, students have even more things to worry about. According to Glass and colleagues (2013), this is the case. At the same time, taking care of travel arrangements, checking health rules and setting up transportation may bring more complications before a person enters the country. Supporting international students and implementing targeted strategies at IIUI will guide them more easily and make them ready for the life and studies at the university.

2.3 Academic challenges

Adapting to new educational systems in other countries can make international students face academic difficulties. The main problem is getting used to new ways of teaching. Every education system is different and students can find it tough to adjust when they are expected to learn by themselves, use critical thinking skills or take part in discussions (Andrade, 2006). For example, some students, used to mainly memorizing, may struggle to keep up in courses that need more teamwork and research. Language gaps are another major difficulty. Students from other countries often find it hard to completely understand classes, books or homework because the main language in use at the school is not their native language. Being unable to communicate well with professors and other students can cause confusion about the required work from the student (Sawir et al., 2008). If students struggle with language, it may discourage them from getting involved in class discussions and stop them from showing their real potential in class which may influence their grades. Also, international students deal with academic expectations that are quite different from

their own. Many Western universities place a lot of importance on independent study, critical thought and research which is not always common in other places (Sherry et al. 2010). There can also be differences in what plagiarism and referencing mean which may lead to confusion and more chances of making mistakes. Besides, studying abroad might make it harder for international students to stay on top of things, as they lack the help they are used to in their own country.

2.5 Difference in Study Methods

Many international students find exams very stressful as the assessment approaches are often very different from those used in their own country (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). With regard to universities in Pakistan. It was found in the study that many Pakistani students depend on memorization and try to write lengthy answers on exams. Not being used to this way of taking tests creates difficulties for international students from Turkey, who often have more problems getting high scores. According to Ersan et al. (2019).

2.6 Language Barriers

2.6.1 Poor English

For countless international students, the difficulty of learning a new language hinders both their academic progress and how well they fit into the student community. Most students in English-speaking countries find that poor English proficiency presents a frequent difficulty. Though they meet language requirements, many international students continue to find academic writing, understanding complex readings, and following lectures in fast English difficult. If students do not speak the language of instruction well, it can be hard for them to handle school assignments, talk confidently in lessons, and communicate effectively with teachers and peers (Sawir et al., 2008). The way foreign students learn a new language also affects their entry into a new country. Having a good sense of the language of training helps the recipient's success. Having

difficulties with the language the class is taught in can cause students to misunderstand what is being studied which will then lower their grades and affect how they feel about their progress. Being fluent in a language helps students adjust better to their social and personal environments. Sometimes, not knowing the language well enough stops students from interacting with community members. Language outputs involve essential features of who we are (Nada & Araújo, 2018).

2.6.2 Lecture delivered in local language

Another significant problem arises when lectures or academic material are delivered in the local language, rather than in a language that international students can easily understand. For example, international students in non-English-speaking countries often struggle when professors switch between English and the local language, as many are unable to grasp what is being taught. Since the rules differ for all students, international students may feel excluded and face additional challenges in their studies (Ersan et al. 2019).

2.6.3. Pronunciation challenges

Differences in how Pakistani people speak English can make understanding conversations tough for international students and this can make communication less smooth. Struggling to pronounce new words often leads students to have less confidence in talking. Such challenges usually make them feel less confident when participating in school or when socializing. When students mispronounce and are not understood, it can lead to misunderstandings which may stop them from joining classroom discussions, leading to loneliness and poor self-esteem (Ersan et al., 2019). Because of this, they may struggle to take part in group activities, since communication is very important for doing well.

2.6.4 Rote Memorization

Students from other countries at IIUI face difficulties getting used to the academic system because the teaching and assessment methods are different. A big problem is the traditional way of teaching which involves a lot of memorizations and is quite different from how education is delivered in other countries. If a system supports critical thinking, analytical ability and application-based work, students are guided to take part in discussions, solve problems and explore topics on their own. Even so, Pakistani students are often asked to memorize a lot and rewrite it in exams which is not something international students are used to. Language barriers make it even tougher for many students who are not from the country. Because courses involve a lot of English texts and exams, students who do not speak English must first grasp the meaning and then work on memorization. It might increase stress at school, cause low confidence and cause differences in achievement based on where students come from. These findings have been reported by Ersan et al. (2019)

2.6.5 Long Answers

One of the main problems international students encounter at IIUI is the requirement to write extensive answers in exams. Long answers tend to score better in the Pakistani education system, because they are viewed as showing more careful preparation. In contrast with many other countries, the method used in formal education often favors giving concise, organized and detailed answers, not long essays. Since they are used to long answers, faculty may consider international students' replies to be too brief for a good assessment. Consequently, a number of international students find that their grades are affected or they have trouble with exams as a result of different academic practices. This might bring about frustration, extra stress and problems with getting used to the ways universities grade and assess students. This situation also came to light during our study in 2019 (Ersan et al. 2019).

2.6.6 Uncooperative Class Fellows

Researchers found that many international students from IIUI have difficulties building relationships with other students. Interviews indicated that local students often did not support international students which led to challenging interactions in class. Researchers Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) concluded that students who have strong ties with other students and teachers usually perform better academically. In other words, when international students at IIUI feel encouraged by others, it might contribute to better results and an enjoyable experience.

2.7 Cultural Adaptation Challenges

As the world gets more interconnected, global relationships are being molded by cultural and linguistic differences. Enhanced international student mobility now makes education in another country a major reason for global travel. Going abroad for studies has become common, as more than millions of students participate annually. Almukdad & Karadag (2024) have proposed that. At the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), students from different countries bring a variety of cultural traditions and ways of thinking. Though diversity in the university benefits everyone, it also leads to some problems with integration and adapting to different cultures

2.8 Cultural differences

Cultural differences can create significant barriers for international students at IIUI, making it difficult for them to understand social norms, behavioral expectations, and communication styles in the host country. People often find adjusting to the cultural rules harder than figuring out a new language (Byrne et al, 2019). Forming bonds outside their own cultural community is difficult for international students which may hurt their chances of settling in socially and culturally (Sadewo et al., 2020). A further obstacle is dealing with faculty and academic staff because the way teachers teach, communicate and build relationships with students may be different in Pakistan than in students' home countries (Kristina et al., 2022). Because of these

differences, students might face even more difficulties with their studies and can start feeling overwhelmed. On top of that, cultural differences and non-acceptance from the local student group often lead to even stronger feelings of exclusion. Sometimes, rather than seeing international students as people who enrich the culture at a university, they are treated as strangers or heavy burdens (Bista, 2018). This lack of inclusivity can delay international student's ability to integrate socially, reinforcing cultural isolation. To enhance cultural adaptation and social integration, IIUI should implement intercultural training programs, peer mentorship initiatives, and structured networking events to promote cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity. Encouraging mutual respect and appreciation of different cultural backgrounds will contribute to a more harmonious and globally aware university environment.

2.9 Socio-Cultural Adjustment

International students usually have to deal with many social and cultural difficulties when settling into a new country. People find it hard to cope with moving because they often get 'culture shock' when faced with new culture and behavior. Students may feel lost, puzzled and uneasy due to culture shock as they encounter new people and customs. Studies describe that when students go to countries with very different cultures, they often experience serious culture shock (Zhou, et al 2008). An example is that international students may not understand how people behave in their new country which can make them feel lonely and awkward. International students find that the social norms in their host country are a major adjustment to make. There are big differences in how people in every culture talk, move and keep personal space which may cause misunderstandings or shyness in social interactions. By way of illustration, students who live in cultures where everyone agrees together and respects authority may find it different from students in societies that focus on individual choice and direct discussions (Sherry et al, 2010). Having such

differences leads to disadvantages in social interactions, making it tough for students to have friends or fit in at their new school.

2.10 Culture shock

When people from different backgrounds go to a foreign country, the struggles they face are considered cultural shock (Mulyadi et al., 2024). Various changes in demographics lead to different cultural issues and these challenges, especially experienced by international students, can result in social crises and accidents around campus. Anyone who spends time with international students will clearly understand how much culture affects people. Students feel uncomfortable when they are placed in new places and new social surroundings (Sumra,2012).

2.11 Self-efficacy

Based on Bandura (1997), self-efficacy describes how a person believes they can accomplish things with what they already know and can do. It includes outcome expectations (the belief about the outcome of actions) and competence expectations (the match between what is done and what can be done). People judge how good they are by seeing how their actions line up with others' and this affects their belief in handling unseen situations. Someone with a strong belief in their skills will typically get through hard times, whereas those with less self-efficacy usually find it much harder, even with the right abilities (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy matters a lot for international students at IIUI when they adapt to local culture and fit into society. According to studies, students who strongly believe in their abilities to do well are able to fit into a new culture by proactively connecting with new people, trying to understand the culture and facing cultural differences (Sawir et al., 2008). If students lack self-belief, they may notice culture shock, become more socially distant, and face additional challenges in class, which makes their transition more complicated. Almada and Karadag (2024) found that self-confidence in learning new skills is a main contributor

to students being able to handle intercultural topics, meet new people and fit in at the university. As a result, increased self-efficacy by students leads to better social integration, since they tend to join in campus activities, meet friends from other cultures and cooperate with their peers on school tasks. As a result, IIUI and similar universities could offer support systems, mentoring and cultural orientation to help international students feel more empowered which would improve their ability to adjust and encourage a sense of belonging.

2.12 Social Integration Challenges

Adapting to social life in the new country strongly affects international students' academic achievements, their mental health, and the whole university experience. Still, many problems prevent some from forming good relationships, joining in college activities, and feeling accepted in their new home. The following are a few important aspects related to social integration problems.

2.13 Local rapport

Relationships with local students help international students at IIUI feel more connected to Pakistan and adjust to its culture. A lot of international learners try to get to know local people so that they can collaborate in school, support one another and learn about new cultures together. Even though classes are meant to help students interact, universities rarely have organized programs to bring international students and local students together (Vander Tavares, 2021). When international students don't engage, it makes them feel alone and notices how their differences stand out which delays their blending into the school and social scenes. Both international students and local people are needed to ensure a smooth integration during their stay together. Some local people may view international students through cultural stereotypes and judge them by their appearance, clothing or behavior, mainly because they do not have much cultural awareness

(Philips, 2021). When interactions are unequal, international students often feel excluded, especially in academic settings which makes it tough for them to fit in. Having false beliefs about international students might create negative feelings from locals which could hold back their successful development in the community (Rozaima, 2018). For improved adaptation to local culture and social inclusion, IIUI should bring in cultural exchange programs, mentorships and involve local and international students in different activities. In turn, this could debunk stereotypes, foster shared understanding and make the campus more welcoming which benefits international students at the university.

2.14 Social Isolation.

Living far from home contributes to social isolation which then makes it challenging for international students to join and feel part of the community. This sense of feeling out of place occurs because of cultural, linguistic or social differences between a person and the community they live in (Sawir et al., 2008). Language differences, strange social habits and few chances to interact are some of the reasons many international students have difficulty forming bonds with their peers (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Students facing social isolation can suffer from psychological distress, added anxiety, lower self-esteem and less engagement with their studies (Glass & Westmont, 2014). If students become isolated, they might avoid taking part in university events which could make them feel less involved in the culture of the new country.

2.15 Psychological and Emotional Well-Being

Loneliness, homesickness and mental health challenges faced by international students might lead to changes in their academic work and the way they fit in with others. Many students miss their families and friends which makes it tough to build new relationships and connections in the host country (Sawir et al., 2008). The feeling of being apart is increased by cultural and shopping

gap's language barriers. Missing the customs, meals and traditions from home, called homesickness, can disturb a student's emotions and make it difficult for them to concentrate in their new surroundings (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Moreover, problems such as anxiety and depression are widespread among students due to the stress of schoolwork and adjusting to a different lifestyle. It is common for international students to avoid using mental health services because they are either ashamed or do not know what is available to them (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Emotional problems can make it hard for students to focus on their studies, join classroom discussions or interact socially which makes their stress and loneliness worse. International students can be helped better with counseling services, social support networks and cultural awareness activities.

2.16 Life satisfaction

How satisfied a person is with their life is an important sign of their psychological adaptation, representing their feelings about what has, is and will be in their life (Appleton & Song, 2019). It greatly affects how well international students connect with people, join extracurricular activities and adapt to life in the United States. The more satisfied people are with their lives, the more their social relationships, emotional state and desire to learn help them fit well into the new culture. Students who study overseas say their life satisfaction depends mostly on their monetary situation, their social networks and availability of academic resources (Appleton & Song, 2019). According to studies, students who have many social contacts, decent financial resources and past experience with the host culture usually have a higher level of happiness. experience less culture shock. Additionally, language proficiency and shared living arrangements have been recognized As a way to improve students' ability to manage a change in their environment (Almukdad and Karadag 2024). According to Sawir et al.'s (2007) study of international students in the U.S., the

less psychological distress students have the longer they live in the host country. For this reason, universities such as IIUI should focus on programs that make international students feel more at ease in school, for example, peer mentoring, cultural introduction, finance advice and mental health resources.

2.17 Financial Challenges

Due to higher living expenses in a foreign country, extra costs that are difficult to predict and problems borrowing money, international students find it harder to plan their finances. In addition, the fluctuating currency exchange rates and problems with part-time jobs for foreign students might add to these issues. International students frequently find managing money to be a difficulty. There is a lot of stress for self-funded students who do not benefit from government support in university because they must take care of tuition and other daily expenses. It is shown by research that financial concerns are a big difficulty for international students, affecting their experience living in another country (Hsu, P. (2003)). In the same way, examining international students enrolled at The University of Toledo indicated that difficulty with finances is a regular problem for the entire course of their education (Sherry et al. (2009)).

2.18 Overcharging or Price Discrimination

A frequent problem for international students at IIUI is that local companies raise their prices when they realize the students are from another country (Ersan et al., 2019). The unequal pricing system adds to the financial problems faced by many international students, as most already burdened with tuition, expenses for living and regular expenses. Feeling pressured financially can cause migrants to feel stressed, upset and mistreated which adds to the difficulty of getting used to their new home.

2.19 Accommodation challenges

One of the key challenges that students have to deal with is housing. This issue is intimately involved with the economy. Due to the lack of space and high fees in both state and private dorms, many students from low-income families share rooms with international friends. Because of this, foreign students may find it harder to grasp the local culture (Kumcağız et al 2016). Being away from home allows students to feel relaxed and safe, which might keep them from learning local customs and even interacting with other students at their university.

2.20 Rental Challenges

The process of finding a place to stay is often a challenge for international students at IIUI, since there is lots of prejudice in the rental market and many students cannot afford it. In many cases, local landlords complain that renting to foreign students who are alone can be more risky, as a result of their concerns about trustworthiness, cultural clashes and problems with rent agreements for non-citizens. When international students cannot get stable housing, they may feel stressed and uncertain which also influences their studies and mental health. There are cases in which landlords make international students pay twice as much for rent as local students do. Because of this practice, international students have to use more of their limited funds for travel which adds economic stress on top of their regular difficulties with tuition, living costs and work options. Because of housing discrimination and high rental prices, students may not be able to live near campus and could end up living in crowded situations with others from their country. Universities could improve housing for everyone by establishing partnerships with local landlords, offering housing on campus and giving help to international students to find acceptable housing at prices they can afford (Sherry, et al 2009).

2.21 Conclusion

The literature included in this chapter outlines the main difficulties faced by international students, especially those at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). Some of the main issues are language gaps, culture shock, difficulties in school life, feeling lonely and stress which all add to the process of including immigrants in a new community. Problems are made worse because of low support from institutions, different levels of English instruction and inefficient mental health and financial aid services. The review points out that students can only adapt successfully when the institution supports them and provides the needed structure and understanding. Programs meant to help students from orientation, connect with others and easily get advice from counselors are very important for them to succeed. As there are students from all over the world and different backgrounds at IIUI, problems become tougher because they don't receive enough steady help. As a result, IIUI should start certain strategies, for instance, teaching a standard set of English, giving students handbooks, hosting activities for all students and continuously dealing with issues related to psychological adjustments to aid in the process. To sum up, facing and overcoming the difficulties that international students experience in Pakistan needs a meaningful, well-planned and respectful plan. If students have good support, they can handle school and culture with ease, avoid health challenges, be more engaged and do well in their courses.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), specifically focusing on the challenges they encounter during the cultural adaptation and social integration process. The phenomenological method, as described by Creswell (2018), emphasizes understanding the essence of individuals lived experiences, allowing the researcher to gather rich, in-depth insights into how students perceive, interpret, and respond to their adjustment processes in a new cultural and academic environment. This phenomenological approach was specifically chosen because the study's primary goal is to understand the essence and meaning of the lived experiences of international students. Rather than quantifying challenges, this approach allows for a deep, empathetic exploration of their journeys, capturing the emotional and psychological nuances of their adaptation process, which a quantitative design would miss.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises international students currently enrolled at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). The international student population is diverse, representing various cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. These students provide valuable insights into their challenges and experiences with cultural adaptation and social integration within the university environment.

3.3 Characteristics of the Study Population

The study population consisted of international students currently enrolled at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). This group was diverse in terms of nationality,

cultural background, and academic level, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Participants were drawn from various faculties and academic programs, offering a broad spectrum of experiences related to academic, cultural, and social life at the university. The sample included both newly admitted students and those who had been at IIUI for a longer duration, ensuring a mix of perspectives on cultural adaptation and social integration over time. Special attention was given to the experiences of female international students, acknowledging the distinct social and cultural challenges they may encounter. Additionally, students demonstrated varying levels of language proficiency in English and local languages, which had a notable impact on their academic engagement and social participation within the university environment.

3.4. Sample/Sampling.

A sample is a subset of the population that is considered truly representative of the population by a researcher. It is a portion of the whole. Selected to participate in the research project (Brink, 1996). The process of selecting a portion of the population to represent the entire population is known as sampling. (Wood & Haber, 1999). The study employed a purposive sampling method to select 20 international students from IIUI, including both male and female participants. This approach ensured a balanced representation of gender while capturing diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. Purposive sampling was considered the most suitable technique for this study, as it allowed for the intentional selection of *information-rich* participants. The goal was not to generalize the results to the entire student population but to include individuals from diverse backgrounds who could offer in-depth and nuanced insights into the processes of cultural adaptation and social integration.

3.5 Procedure (Data Collection)

The study involved international students currently enrolled at IIUI, focusing exclusively on their experiences. A purposive sampling method was used to select approximately 25 international students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds to ensure a broad representation of perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants the flexibility to share their experiences while ensuring that key topics were addressed. These interviews explored the academic, social, and psychological challenges the students faced and assessed the effectiveness of existing support systems in facilitating their cultural adaptation and social integration.

3.6 Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the lived experiences of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) regarding cultural adaptation and social integration. This interview protocol included open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their thoughts in depth, providing the researcher with the flexibility to explore their responses in more detail.

The instrument comprised three thematic sections:

1. **Social Integration:** covering students' initial experiences, relationship-building, challenges in forming connections, and suggestions for enhancing social inclusion.
2. **Cultural Adaptation:** addressing difficulties in adjusting to local customs, traditions, and language barriers.
3. **Institutional Support and Recommendations:** focusing on students' perceptions of IIUI's support services and their suggestions for improvements.

The questions were carefully developed to align with the research objectives and to ensure relevance, clarity, and depth. Additionally, notes to the interviewee were included in the protocol to establish trust and transparency, clearly explaining the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the academic purpose of the study. This instrument gathered rich, qualitative data reflective of participants' personal experiences and perceptions, essential for a phenomenological research design.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity is a measure of the truth or falsity of the data obtained using the research instrument (Burns & Grove). To ensure the validity of the semi-structured interview guide, the questions were developed carefully based on the research objectives and a thorough review of relevant literature on international students' cultural adaptation and social integration. Content validity was established through consultation with two academic experts in qualitative research and international education. Their feedback informed revisions that enhanced clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's goals.

3.8 Pilot Testing

A pilot interview was conducted with one international student at IIUI to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the questions. Based on this trial, minor adjustments were made to enhance the flow and relevance of the questions, further improving their consistency and reliability. These steps helped ensure that the instrument would consistently collect meaningful and comparable data across all interviews, thus strengthening the overall reliability of the study.

3.9 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to international students' challenges and the effectiveness of support services. This

method allowed for a detailed examination of the participants lived experiences. Thematic coding categorized the data into major themes such as academic difficulties, social integration, psychological well-being, and recommendations for improving institutional support. These themes were developed through a systematic process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement, ensuring that the analysis accurately reflected the voices of the participants.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The research followed strict ethical standards to protect and respect all participants. Each participant gave consent to be interviewed after being informed about what the study involved, that being involved was voluntary and that they had the right to end their participation at any time without problems. In order to keep things confidential, the study removed any details that could be linked to participants. All personal and sensitive information such as interview recordings and transcripts, was kept safe to ensure data security and privacy. Before starting the research, ethical approval was granted by the institution's ethics committee to confirm that the procedures were ethical for research done on subjects.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Departmental Ethics Review Committee before data collection began. Each participant received an informed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, highlighted the voluntary nature of their participation, and emphasized their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms, such as 'Participant 1,' were used in the thesis. All digital data, including audio recordings and transcripts, are stored on a password-protected and encrypted hard drive, accessible only to the researcher.

3.11 Limitations of the study

This study offers valuable insights into the cultural adaptation and social integration of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). However, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations:

1. Limited Sample Size:

The study relied on interviews with a relatively small group of international students.

Although the sample was diverse, it may not accurately represent the entire international student population at IIUI.

2. Single Institutional Context:

The research focused exclusively on IIUI, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other universities in Pakistan or to different cultural and institutional contexts.

3. Subjective Nature of Qualitative Data:

As a qualitative study based on self-reported experiences, the data may be influenced by personal biases, memory limitations, and emotional framing from participants.

4. Language Barriers During Interviews:

While participants communicated in English, varying levels of fluency may have hindered their ability to fully articulate complex thoughts and experiences.

5. Exclusion of Faculty and Administrative Perspectives:

The study centered solely on student voices. Including faculty and administrative staff could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of institutional practices and policies.

6. Time Constraints:

Due to the academic calendar and participant availability, interviews were conducted within a limited timeframe, potentially restricting the depth of follow-up interactions.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of cultural adaptation and social integration faced by international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). It aims to provide valuable insights for new international students who plan to join IIUI, assisting them in better preparing for the academic, social, and cultural adjustments they may confront. Furthermore, the study seeks to encourage the host university to adopt a more supportive and understanding stance toward international students, addressing their challenges and fostering an inclusive academic environment. The study's findings reveal five key themes that highlight the main areas of difficulty and adjustment experienced by international students at IIUI.

Theme 1: Language Barrier

Language is also a crucial aspect in adapting foreign students to a new country. One of the fundamental aspects of successful training in the recipient country is knowledge of the language of studying. Not knowing the language of study can negatively affect the understanding of the class content, which will eventually affect students' grades and feelings of achievement. Language proficiency directly impacts students' socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Binder & Smith, 2013). There are following three subthemes of a language barrier.

a) Limited English proficiency

A low level of language proficiency may prevent students from communicating with the local community. Language outputs extend to profound identity (Nada, & Araújo, 2018).

For most international students at IIUI, English is not their first language; for some, it is a second or even third language. As a result, many students struggle to meet the expected level of English

proficiency required for academic success. This language barrier not only affects their performance in lectures, assignments, and examinations but also creates difficulties in social interactions and cultural adaptation. Since the majority of international students do not speak the local language (Urdu), English becomes their primary mode of communication. When students are not confident or fluent in English, it limits their ability to build social connections, participate in class discussions, and navigate daily life on campus, thereby hindering both academic integration and social inclusion.

"When I give presentations, I don't feel as comfortable as the Pakistani students. If they have difficulty explaining something, they can switch to Urdu, but I can't do that. If I speak in my own language, like Indonesian, no one will understand me. So, when I struggle to express myself in English, I just smile instead of saying anything." Participant

This statement highlights the complex layers of academic and psychological stress arising from linguistic disadvantages. The participant contrasts their experience with that of local students, who can utilize Urdu as a fallback language during presentations. In contrast, international students lack this option, leaving them to communicate solely in a second or third language, typically English, regardless of their proficiency. This limitation significantly undermines their ability to articulate and reinforce their ideas under pressure. The phrase *"I just smile instead of saying anything"* is particularly revealing and illuminating. It suggests that the student has adopted a passive coping strategy, opting for silence to avoid the risk of miscommunication or embarrassment. While this choice may preserve their dignity in the moment, it also contributes to their invisibility in academic settings and restricts their full participation and confidence-building. The student's discomfort points to deeper psychological barriers. Presentation settings inherently induce anxiety, and when combined with language insecurity, students may develop a fear of public

speaking, engage in self-censorship, and experience feelings of inadequacy. Over time, these issues can hinder academic performance and participation, negatively affecting GPA and class engagement.

"Even when I understand something in English, it takes me a long time to read and then write it in my own words. Sometimes I know the meaning, but I don't know how to explain it properly in writing." Participant.

This quote highlights the significant cognitive effort that international students invest when using a second or third language. Even with a basic understanding of English, the process of decoding information, mentally translating it, and reconstructing it into written academic language requires more time and mental energy compared to native or fluent speakers. This increased cognitive load which can negatively affect academic efficiency and performance.

This aligns with Trenkic (2018), who discovered that international students often face challenges with the speed and complexity of processing academic English, particularly in writing tasks.

The participant's statement underscores an important distinction: understanding a concept is not the same as being able to articulate it in writing. This gap is a common challenge for non-native English speakers in academic environments. Many international students understand the content but struggle with the academic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and rhetorical structure necessary to communicate their ideas confidently and precisely. As a result, they may underperform in written assessments, despite having a genuine understanding of the material.

This illustrates that language proficiency encompasses not only comprehension but also the ability to convey that understanding effectively, especially in critical academic tasks such as essays or exams.

Another participant commented:

"When the teacher writes lessons on the whiteboard, the Pakistani students write much faster than I do. The teacher then asks, 'Did you all write it down?' and they respond 'Yes,' so he erases it and writes something new. But I hadn't finished writing the previous part, and I feel too shy to say no."

Participant.

This highlights how language processing speed and classroom dynamics can disadvantage international students, especially when they feel hesitant to speak up. Such experiences may contribute to academic difficulties and feelings of exclusion during classroom activities.

b) Teaching in Urdu During Lectures

Another critical issue is when lectures or academic content are delivered in the host country's local language, rather than in a language the international students are proficient in. In non-English-speaking countries, for instance, international students might struggle if professors switch between English and the local language, making it difficult for non-native speakers to follow the lectures or engage with course materials. This inconsistency can create a sense of exclusion and frustration for international students, further complicating their academic journey (Ersan et al. 2019).

"I had a big challenge in class because of Urdu. When I came to Pakistan, I thought the education would be entirely in English. But after starting my studies, I realized that teachers mostly speak Urdu. It was very difficult for me to learn and understand both languages at the same time."

Participant

This highlights the disconnect between students' expectations and the linguistic realities of classroom instruction, which often undermines their academic engagement and contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Some participants noted that local students often complain when instructors deliver lectures entirely in English. As a result, many teachers switch from English to Urdu during class. This language shift creates a significant barrier for international students, particularly those who do not understand Urdu. One participant noted that this issue made it difficult to follow the lecture, engage in class discussions, and ultimately hurt academic performance, including their CGPA.

"When the teacher starts teaching in English, some local students don't understand because many of them come from villages and their English is not strong, especially the BS students. So the teacher starts speaking in Urdu, and then the whole lecture continues in Urdu." Participant

This practice often leaves international students unable to follow the lecture content, further complicating their academic adaptation and contributing to a sense of exclusion in the classroom environment.

c) Accent and Communication Difficulties

In the context of cultural adaptation, one significant barrier identified by international students at IIUI was the difficulty in understanding different English accents. Since English is not the first language for either global or local students, variations in pronunciation and speaking styles often lead to confusion and miscommunication. As noted by Majid et al. (2017), such challenges are common and can negatively impact students' ability to follow lectures and interact effectively in class. One participant explained:

"It's hard to understand my classmates and sometimes even my teachers because their English accent is very different from what I'm used to. I miss parts of what they say, and that makes it difficult to follow the lesson." Participant

This challenge reflects a broader issue of linguistic adaptation, which not only affects academic understanding but also limits social engagement, contributing to feelings of isolation among international students

According to Maesidor and Sly (2016), some international students hesitate to participate in classroom discussions due to fears of being misunderstood or ridiculed for their pronunciation. This concern was expressed by participants in this study, who noted that differences in accent often created communication barriers with local students and instructors. Many international students at IIUI reported that their English pronunciation was not easily understood, which at times led to embarrassment, reduced confidence, and a reluctance to speak in class.

One participant shared her experience:

"Sometimes when I speak, the teacher or classmates don't understand me clearly because of my accent. It makes me feel shy, and I stop talking even if I know the answer." Participant

This demonstrates how accent-related misunderstandings can affect student confidence and restrict their academic and social participation, making cultural adaptation and social integration more difficult.

Theme 2: Cultural barriers

The term "culture shock" is commonly associated with Kalervo Oberg, who introduced it in his 1954 publication. Oberg defined culture shock as an emotional experience caused by anxiety stemming from the loss of familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. Based on this understanding, international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) often experience culture shock when they first arrive and begin to adjust to a new cultural and academic environment. This theme explores the emotional and practical challenges students encounter during this process. From the data collected, four main subthemes emerged: cultural differences, daily life challenges, environmental adaptation, and educational style. These subthemes highlight the key areas where students experience stress, confusion, and adjustment as part of their cultural transition at IIUI.

a) Cultural differences

Significant obstacles appear for international students when they leave their familiar lives and try to fit in elsewhere. It's common for these cultural differences to be noticed right away after you reach your destination. An interviewee said:

"Most of the people at the airport looking at me when I arrived. I am not sure, but I think it was my skin color that influenced this. Looking someone in the eyes for a long time is not allowed and you should not start chatting with someone you are not familiar with". Participant

The response reveals that the student does not feel comfortable or sure of how to respond to new social behaviors in the host country. That kind of normal interaction such as making eye contact or being friendly, in Pakistan could make a student uncomfortable, as it is seen differently in their culture. It made me feel set aside at first and also pointed out how different expectations can be

for international students. Such differences can make it hard for them to connect with others and fit in which plays a big role in the culture shock confronted by IIUI students.

b) Daily life challenge

Adjusting to life in a different country is not always easy for new international students. Students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) find that there are challenges other than academic work due to cultural differences. The challenges involve special food preferences, how privacy is respected, and social manners. Someone described how they experienced stress related to food while on the show.

"The spice level of the food is more than I can handle. I did not eat well in the first couple of weeks. A lot of times, tourists will ask questions that feel too personal, such as about my income or my marital status. In my nation, such matters are not discussed publicly. Sometimes people snap photos or shoot videos, often without informing the people first. It is unpleasant for me." Participant.

This describes how things that are normal for local students can bother or distress their international peers. Food, which is an everyday need and something that brings comfort, often stands in the way of good fitness and adapting to another culture when it is not unfamiliar. What Pakistanis usually talk about in a casual way, such as their money concerns or family, might not be regarded as acceptable in other parts of the world. Ignoring how differences exist can cause someone to feel lonely and isolated. Someone brought up a similar case with what it means to respect personal space and the rules in different places: We usually don't get as close together when we talk at home. Being so close to strangers is what makes me feel anxious in crowds. There was an occasion when one of my classmates touched my shoulder during a chat, but I didn't have an idea of what to do. I was uncomfortable, but I didn't want to be disrespectful." Participant This illustrates that having a mismatch in physical contact can make students feel more or less safe and

accepted in the classroom. New customs related to humans and surroundings might cause international students to become anxious and slow down their own adaptation. All these stories illustrate that getting used to another culture often means dealing with subtle social habits each day. By dealing with these problems, international students at IIUI can be made to feel respected, accepted, and supported.

c) Environmental adjustment

Getting used to a new physical environment is another big challenge for students who have come to IIUI from other countries. Climate, the place where people live, and how comfortable they are might prevent students from getting settled and succeeding at school. According to the study, a lot of participants said the hot weather during summer in Islamabad and the uncomfortable dorm conditions were major issues for them. A student mentioned:

“I arrived at the airport on a hot summer day. It was very hot outside which I wasn’t used to. Once I arrived at the hostel, I slept in the same bed night after night which wasn’t very enjoyable”.

Participant.

They show that the experience of living in a new culture caused stress for their bodies and minds. In the study by Smith and Khawaja (2011), weather-based discomfort can have a negative impact on students’ health and mood especially when they are new in the country. Students moving to Islamabad from cooler places might struggle with sleeping, feeling tired and focusing in the heat. In addition to other problems, the environment for everyone at the hostel was hard. Student accommodation usually means less privacy; more noise and sharing rooms which can be a problem for people from other countries with different living circumstances. The difficulties of housing can make students feel more uneasy, homesick and stressed. In general, how well international students cope with life at IIUI depends greatly on how much they adapt environmentally. Having difficulties

with the physical surroundings at school can influence a student's feelings, friendships and educational results which is part of the culture shock.

d) Writing Expectations and Assessment Style

International students have mentioned that writing long answers during exams is another challenge they face at IIUI. Several people found it frustrating that how students wrote ,not what they wrote was often considered more important. This style felt strange and quickly became something many people found impossible, mostly those who valued quick responses. A participant said:

“In Somaliland, often a few words are enough for an exam answer as long as it is the right one. But in Pakistan, students must complete more and more pages of writing”. Participant

Many participants mentioned that some teachers evaluated mainly by the amount of text produced, compared to the quality of learning. Because of that, their academic preparation did not match the requirements at IIUI, explained another student. Most of the time, teachers check the amount of material we have written in the exam. If we write a lot, we get better marks and if we write less, even if it's correct, our marks will be low. It seems strange to me that they do not give attention to whether the answer is correct or not." Participant Such discoveries point out that when there are differences in teaching methods and assessment styles, it can be hard for international students to do well which can affect their grades and self-assurance.

Theme 3: Difficulty forming friendships

The initial stage for international students at IIUI can be tough when it comes to finding meaningful friends. Making new friends helps you get used to the new culture and education system. Still, changes in language, culturally set behaviors and what is considered normal can be

big barriers. Many participants said that they felt lonely or excluded, wanting to build real friendships with young Americans but frequently finding it hard. As a result of not integrating well with others, these immigrants often feel lonely, stressed and it takes them a long time to adjust. Friendships among students were sometimes formed based on their language skills and the idea that some local students preferred to socialize with international students. This theme points out how important it is for students to rely on their peers and other people as they live in a foreign nation.

a) Social isolation

Social isolation was identified as a significant subtheme within the broader theme of challenges in forming friendships. For many international students at IIUI, the lack of close social connections particularly with local students resulted in feelings of loneliness and emotional distance during their initial adjustment period. Participants reported experiencing exclusion from both academic and informal social settings, which often led to withdrawal, increased stress, and difficulties in adapting to university culture. This isolation was not necessarily the result of hostility but frequently arose from unintentional, communication barriers, and a lack of familiarity with local social interaction norms.

“In my first semester, I felt invisible.” Participant

This student shared that despite attending classes regularly, they felt like no one noticed their presence. Classmates rarely initiated conversations, and group work often left them feeling isolated. The phrase *“felt invisible”* captures a deep emotional experience of exclusion. This type of passive social isolation where students are not actively excluded but simply ignored—can significantly impact self-esteem and a student’s motivation to participate. It also suggests that even

institutional structures like group work may not be effective unless inclusivity is deliberately fostered. One participant mentioned:

“I used to eat alone every day.” Participant

Another participant explained that they spent most of their time alone, particularly during breaks, because they did not feel welcomed into their peers' social circles.

Eating alone frequently symbolizes broader social isolation. In many cultures, shared meals provide a primary opportunity for bonding. Being excluded from these informal social spaces means missing chances to develop friendships and integrate into the social environment. This experience may reinforce feelings of alienation and deepen psychological stress, especially for students from communal cultures.

“The first year was really depressing. I had no one to talk to.” Participant

This participant highlighted the emotional toll of social isolation, noting that they had no friends to confide in during their early months at IIUI. They added that, although others were polite, no one made an effort to connect. This response emphasizes the emotional and mental health consequences of isolation. The lack of deep interpersonal connections even in the presence of surface-level politeness left the student feeling unsupported and emotionally drained. The phrase *“no one to talk to”* suggests not only physical loneliness but also a lack of emotional outlets, which can contribute to anxiety or depressive symptoms during the adaptation period.

b) Low Satisfaction with Social Life

Low Satisfaction with Social Life describes the feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and unfulfilled social expectations that some international students at IIUI encounter. Despite being immersed in a diverse academic environment, numerous students report limited friendships,

minimal engagement in campus activities, and difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships, particularly with local students. This subtheme highlights the disparity between the social expectations students held before they arrived at IIUI and their actual experiences. Social life is essential for integration, especially for international students adjusting to a new cultural and academic environment. Without strong peer connections, these students are more likely to face emotional challenges such as loneliness and homesickness, as well as academic disengagement, diminished cultural adaptation, and feelings of exclusion or cultural isolation. This subtheme closely aligns with Tinto's Social Integration Theory, which highlights that a student's ability to form social connections within the university community significantly impacts their retention, motivation, and overall well-being.

"In my first semester, I felt invisible." Participant

The phrase "felt invisible" is powerful and symbolic. It reflects emotional and social invisibility, where the student is physically present but emotionally disconnected. This often results from peers' lack of initiative to include or engage international students. The participant's experience exemplifies a passive form of exclusion not outright rejection, but a failure to make an effort to welcome them. Such isolation can lead to social withdrawal and emotional distress.

"I used to eat alone every day." Participant

To eat alone means there is a deeper sense of social disconnection. Time spent eating is often a way for families or groups to bond. Controller's repeated solo meals are not only signs of loneliness but also make them feel separate. The participant may have wished for friendly chatting with anyone during break, yet figured out that people's friend groups were already formed and he was left to the side. It might make homesickness worse and lower the person's willingness to join in with other social activities. The letter demonstrates that international students can get

discouraged and exhausted from trying to find acceptance if people around them ignore or shrug off their approach. With many rejections, people may begin to avoid meeting new people or being social more often. As a result, it is harder to make friends which contributes to the feeling of exclusion, more unhappiness with social life, and emotional and academic difficulties. “Whenever *I tried to connect with my classmates, many of them did not seem interested and just ignored me. I lost my motivation after a while*” Participant

“I have some friends, but they’re all from my country. I don’t know any Pakistani students closely.”
Participant

Therefore, we tend to form friendships with people who share the same beliefs we do, usually as a defense strategy. If it is difficult for international students to interact with local students, they might group up with others who speak the same language. While friends help you emotionally, they keep you away from other cultures and languages which you need to adjust fully. It also keeps students from feeling they belong to the same university. The theme "*Low Satisfaction with Social Life*" points out that it is a common issue for international students at IIUI. Even with many diverse friends nearby, numerous students report feeling ignored, left out or not a part of things which leads to emotional struggles and affects school performance. It indicates that there aren’t enough organized ways to interact, less cross-cultural communication, and not enough help from the university.

c) Psychological and Emotional Well-Being

This subtheme investigates the mental and emotional state of international students in IIUI. Not having home, family and familiar culture nearby can create feelings of loneliness, homesickness, anxiety, depression or trouble with identifying oneself. Young people may struggle even more if there is not enough emotional support and if mental health services are not culturally

sensitive. At times when stress gets too much, some students start using drugs or alcohol to forget or ignore the emotions they feel. These behaviors are signs of both health issues and also of people being cut off from society, culture and proper support from organizations. According to Yeh & Inose (2003), social integration and cultural adjustment depend on having psychological well-being. Not dealing with emotional and mental health problems can reduce your achievement in school and lower your sense of well-being.

“I was feeling so lonely during my first semester that I tried sleeping pills to keep my mind occupied. Because I missed my family so much and couldn’t talk anyone, I didn’t sleep”.

Participant.

The quote shows the effect social isolation and homesickness have on a person’s emotional wellbeing. The student relies on sleep pills to get away from emotional pain, as opposed to simply wanting to rest. So, there were no psychological support services nearby, they were not familiar or it was hard for her to access them and that’s why she started self-medicating. If it’s not managed, it can bring about dependence and major health complications.

“Some students at the hostel have taken drugs. People share that this helps them relax and cope with being away from their families. I don’t engage in it, but many people do, especially people who find themselves alone a lot”. Participant

This statement points out that, mainly because of their isolation, many international students cope with stress by experimenting with drugs. Using drugs to relieve stress suggests there are not enough healthy ways to handle emotions and mental health support is not enough. Because of this, taking drugs is related to feeling worn out emotionally, living without much support and being more at risk mentally.

“I started feeling depressed, especially during the winter break. Most Pakistani students went home, and the hostel was so empty. I felt completely alone and cried almost every night.”

Participant.

International students have reported experiencing seasonal loneliness and emotional stress and it gets worse whenever holiday breaks occur due to visa difficulties, travel expenses or simply being far away. Lacking social interactions during self-isolation increases emotional isolation and may result in depressive feelings. Because of the student’s breakdown, it is clear that keeping psychological support constant, especially when not focusing on academics, is crucial.

“It seems like nobody truly understands the things I deal with. It feels as if I am in a crowd but I am still alone.” Participant.

This quote reveals the basic idea of emotional and cultural loneliness. Even with other students around, the student feels little connection and cultural understanding. Having these feelings which are often connected to “existential loneliness,” often changes a student’s mental health, sense of self and ability to adjust in their new education environment. It tells us how important social interaction is and at the same time, having understanding and supportive groups is very important. The subtheme concentrates on the emotional issues caused by being displaced culturally, isolated from others and the pressure from school work for international students at IIUI. People who emigrate may continue to struggle, with stress, anxiety, depression often becoming routine and some turning to sleeping pills and recreational drugs as a way out. Loneliness develops since students often decide to emotionally separate from their peers, even when they are present in the university. Particularly, mental health struggles are rarely talked about and poorly managed, as there is still a negative social view on this topic, language challenges and limited support from institutions. Many times, students do not express their distress, assuming they will be badly judged

or not understood which further separates them and increases their stress. It calls for universities to focus on mental health more broadly and take into account cultural sensitivity by offering easy access to counseling, support groups and awareness campaigns sensitive to all origins of international students.

Theme 4: Economic Pressure

International students found economic pressure to be a major obstacle at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). Financial issues affected many participants since they were related to academic work, getting along in society and adjusting to living in another country. Compared to local students, many international students deal with excess expenses, have fewer options for scholarships and experience tough guidelines for working which causes them to feel financially stressed more frequently. Economic pressure stands in the way of people from a different background joining the local culture and society. Students who have financial difficulties cannot attend many university events or take part in social and learning activities which makes it harder for them to integrate with the rest of the community. Besides, challenges with money add stress, anxiety and uncertainty to students, making them feel nervous and less connected. Post-Soviet youths mentioned different worries about money such as high expenses, a rise in school fees, not enough funding from the institution and restricted chances to earn money legally. Some found that they were treated differently by paying more for housing and other services just because they did not have Canadian citizenship. As a result, an increase in family remittances makes it hard for migrants to adapt to the local culture and leads to financial instability. It explains how economic conditions are very important in determining how international students experience life at IIUI. It points out that there should be better financial support systems and more flexible rules to help people adapt economically which helps them integrate into society.

a) High Cost of Living and Tuition

International students at IIUI find it particularly difficult to manage their finances, as the cost of living and tuition is quite high. Such costs have an impact on learning and on the student's ability to adapt to the new culture and join in with the local community. A lot of students state that just making ends meet is more important than joining in the cultural and social activities organized by the university. A participant said: *"At times, I end up in my room since I cannot afford to hang out with friends."* Participant.

This statement shows that financial restrictions are linked to social withdrawal. Lacking money for fun activities prevents students from meeting and forming strong bonds with peers, making it hard for them to blend in a new environment. Exclusion like this may result in people feeling alone, uncared for, and different from others. Financial obstacles stop them from interacting well with others, which reduces their opportunities to understand the culture, language, and rules of their new area.

"I am always worried every semester if my family can send us the money, we need for my studies."

“. Participant

The meaning of this expression is that uncertainty related to money causes a lot of emotional and mental pressure. Many times, the pressure brought on by anxiety can cause students to become stressed and do worse in their studies. Lack of financial security reduces students' confidence and makes it harder for them to feel secure in the new place they are studying. According to the quote, both financial trouble and the lack of stability in school district students from doing well academically. *"Foreign students are commonly made to pay more for housing, as we realize they have no other alternatives"*. Participant. In this statement, the student points to perceived economic exploitation and discriminatory practices in the housing market. This reflects a deeper structural issue where international students feel targeted and

financially disadvantaged due to their status. Such experiences contribute to a sense of exclusion and inequity, reinforcing feelings of “otherness” and eroding trust in the host environment. When students perceive unfair treatment, it weakens their connection to the local community and hinders both cultural immersion and social bonding.

All these quotes together prove that the high expenses at IIUI, which many students struggle with, greatly influence what students from other countries experience. Survival often becomes the top priority for students, which results in less social and cultural interaction, isolation, and reduced chances to adapt. Besides, unequal economic situations and feelings of discrimination by international students make the psychological gap between themselves and the community grow. As a result, difficult financial conditions in such situations act as a problem for people and also shape their cultural and social lives. It prevents students from taking part in both learning and social activities, possibly interrupting their efforts to integrate into the university.

b) Limited Financial Support and Scholarships

A significant concern raised by many participants was the lack of targeted financial support for international students, including scholarships, stipends, and emergency funding. While financial strain is a common issue among students globally, participants in this study emphasized that the insufficient financial aid structures for non-local students placed them in a particularly vulnerable position. This economic hardship not only affected their basic living and academic expenses but also restricted their ability to engage socially and culturally, hindering their integration into the host environment. As one participant noted, there is a clear disparity in scholarship eligibility:

“There are scholarships, but they’re not for international students.”

The statement points out that some participants felt they were overlooked when it comes to financial resources, which they interpreted as discrimination. If international students notice that most financial aid is not offered to them, they might feel excluded at the university. As a result of these differences, students may feel separated from the rest of the campus and have less motivation to get involved because they see there is unequal treatment. Another individual said: *“There isn’t any financial support for us, and we are not certain how to go about applying for it”*. Participant. It points out that the lack of aid and not having enough information cause difficulties. Since students do not receive clear information or direction, even little support can be very hard to get. Therefore, many international students feel neglected and at sea, so they depend a lot on their loved ones outside the country. Here, rather than growing, studying, and socializing, they are driven by only the feat of making money to stay alive. A participant pointed out that differences between domestic and international students are very clear: *“Local students receive help, but international students have to take care of everything by themselves”*. Participant.

This quote reveals how individuals feel that unfair treatment by institutions adds to their sense of aloneness. Seeing other kids in the community always get financial aid, though excluded just like them, makes me feel indifferent and causes doubts about fairness. Making such comparisons separates foreign and domestic students, so it becomes very hard for foreign students to take part in activities with their peers or school organizations. Eventually, this might cause people to feel separated from each other and lose interest in exchange with other cultures. All in all, these findings demonstrate that exclusion from the economy is also a social and cultural obstacle. International students can feel isolated from everyone and everything since raising money and finding help tend to be hard. The shortage of inclusive study resources and lack of good communication prevents people from using helpful tools and undermines the important bonds they

need with members of the host culture. Also, the constant worry about finances without any help from the institution makes it difficult for people to fit into the new environment surrounding them. Not all students feel comfortable taking part in cultural events, networking, or other student-led activities because of their money problems or since the college appears to ignore them. In essence, the financial hardship that some international students face stops them from becoming fully involved in the campus life and in the country's culture.

C) Employment Restrictions and Financial Dependency

International students in IIUI often face hardships since they can't take part in part-time work legally, which means they must rely on their families for longer and become more at-risk. Most foreign students in other countries can find small jobs, but Pakistan's regulations do not offer such opportunities to students. It negatively affects students' freedom, mental health, and their chances of fitting in with others in the host society. Students have said they are bothered by their situation, since they cannot work and therefore remain dependent on others, secluded from many activities, and can easily feel overwhelmed. One of the participants commented,

Working is not possible for me because there is no option. We do not have permission. "Participant.

This reflects the inflexibility of the university that keeps students from handling their finances. Stopping students from working makes them totally depend on their families' money, but since these funds might be delayed or affected by foreign exchange or crisis problems, students can suffer. In addition, a lack of jobs means students do not have an opportunity to mix with others and become part of their community. In numerous cases, working part-time helps people experience the local culture, improve their language skills, and interact with others, which are important parts of adjusting to a new culture. Such opportunities cannot be available in this situation.

Another participant shared how their lack of income generation leads to emotional strain:

“Sometimes I feel like a burden to my family. I cannot help even if they are struggling.” Participant

It brings out how emotional and moral stress can arise from how much international students have to rely on their finances. A lot of beneficiaries showed feelings of guilt and confusion, mainly when their families suffered from financial difficulties. The feelings of stress may cause students to withdraw, lower their self-worth, and lose motivation to interact with what is going on around them. What’s more, such stress prevents refugees from engaging in useful social and educational activities. A third participant remarked:

“If I could work even a little, life would be different I could meet people, learn, and feel useful.”

Participant.

This statement underscores the interconnectedness of employment, social engagement, and self-empowerment. The inability to work limits not only financial independence but also deprives students of valuable experiences that foster social interaction and cultural learning. Through part-time employment, students typically gain local language skills, cultural insights, and interpersonal networks all essential for adapting to a new society. Consequently, the prohibition on employment effectively closes off a vital avenue for integration, both socially and culturally.

The inability to engage in paid work, along with the lack of institutional alternatives like stipends or internships, puts international students in a precarious situation. Without the ability to contribute economically to their survival, they face dependence without agency, which adversely impacts their identity, autonomy, and confidence.

From a social integration perspective, employment serves as a gateway to interaction with the host community, providing opportunities for informal engagement, friendship building, and cross-

cultural communication. Without this opportunity, international students often find themselves confined to narrow social circles, primarily consisting of co-nationals or fellow foreigners, which hinders their cultural immersion and exacerbates social isolation.

Culturally, part-time work exposes students to local norms, values, and expectations, allowing them to internalize cultural cues and reduce misunderstandings. In its absence, many international Students feel disconnected from the broader society of their host country. In conclusion, employment restrictions and the resulting financial dependency create a structural disadvantage for international students at IIUI. These policies not only limit students economically but also hinder essential pathways to cultural adaptation and social engagement, thereby undermining the overall integration process.

c) Perceived Price Discrimination

Some students reported that they felt they were charged different prices than local students at IIUI. According to students, they were either overcharged or treated unequally in dealings for accommodation, services and informal goods because they were foreign. As a result of being put through difficult situations, many students experienced economic exploitation, increased feelings of being excluded from society, and less trust in the world which created problems for both their cultural adjustment and social integration. As one participant shared:

“Landlords increase rent when they know we’re foreigners. They think we’re rich.” Participant.

This statement suggests, through stereotype, that foreign students are wealthier, so prices are raised. Students believed they were being unfairly treated with higher costs based on their race which caused them to feel angry and wronged. Because of this economic discrimination, international students and local service staff often feel mistrustful which hinders the cultural

adaptation process. Feeling used economically by others often stops students from mixing with the local community, often causing them to spend more time with like-minded foreign students.

Another person said:

“I pay more for the same thing simply because I don’t speak the language well or because I look like a foreigner.” Participant.

This statement highlights how visible identity markers and language barriers can result in unequal economic treatment. Students who struggled with Urdu or other local languages often found it difficult to negotiate prices or recognize standard rates, putting them at a disadvantage. Over time, these repeated experiences led to frustration and a reluctance to engage in everyday interactions like shopping or bargaining activities that often provide valuable opportunities for cultural learning and social connection. Consequently, students were less likely to participate in the local economy, which limited their exposure to cultural norms and social experiences in their host environment.

“Sometimes, shops or taxi drivers charge us more because they assume we don’t know any better.”

Participant

This statement highlights a recurring behavior that students perceived as exploiting their lack of familiarity with local pricing. Such experiences were often viewed as unjust and disheartening, particularly for those trying to adapt to a new culture. When individuals feel mistreated due to their outsider status, it can deter them from engaging with the host society and create emotional barriers to integration. As a result, students may choose to stay within their familiar circles or avoid public interactions altogether.

Theme 5: Accommodation difficulties

Accommodation plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of international students as they adapt to a new cultural, academic, and social environment. For those studying at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), housing conditions significantly impact their emotional well-being, daily routines, and opportunities for social interaction. This theme examines the various challenges related to accommodation faced by international students in both university hostels and off-campus housing and how these challenges affect their cultural adaptation and social integration. Participants reported several difficulties, including inadequate hostel facilities, obstacles in securing private housing, and interpersonal tensions in shared living arrangements. These housing-related issues often led to discomfort, isolation, and limited opportunities for meaningful interactions with peers and local communities. Consequently, accommodation emerged as more than just a logistical concern; it became a vital factor influencing students' sense of stability, inclusion, and participation in their host environment.

a) Inadequate hostel facilities

Numerous international students at IIUI have raised concerns regarding the quality and conditions of the university's hostel facilities. Common issues identified include overcrowded rooms, inadequate sanitation, insufficient maintenance, lack of privacy, and limited communal spaces. These deficiencies have not only compromised students' physical comfort, psychological well-being, and capacity to engage fully in academic and social activities.

Substandard living conditions can foster an environment of stress and discomfort, hindering students' focus on their studies and diminishing their motivation to engage in campus life. Additionally, the lack of privacy and personal space can lead to feelings of vulnerability and frustration, complicating students' ability to relax and feel at home in their new surroundings. The

absence of appropriate recreational or social areas further restricts opportunities for informal interaction and peer bonding, which are essential for cultural adaptation and social integration.

As one participant explained:

“The hostel rooms are very cramped, and sometimes more students are put in a room than it can handle. The bathrooms are often not clean, and this makes living here very uncomfortable.

“Participant

The statement stresses that overcrowding and poor sanitation cause daily stress and disappointment for many. International students who do not know what to expect can find these problems, especially trying, causing them to feel even more isolated. The participant’s concern for hygiene shows that a clean environment supports people’s health and feelings. Also, crowded living quarters often prevent students from finding somewhere peaceful to read or relax which they need to handle campus life and get used to being in a foreign country. When housing is not enough, it may make you feel stressed and it can be harder to focus or feel lonely. All in all, the inadequate degree of hostel facilities greatly hampers international students’ success at IIUI. Dealing with these issues could improve students’ lives, help them fit in comfortably and lead them to better social involvement on campus.

a) Roommate Conflicts

Roommate conflicts frequently arose among international students living in shared hostel accommodations at IIUI. These disputes often arose from differing hygiene habits, lifestyle choices, cultural expectations, and communication barriers. While some tensions went unaddressed, others escalated into verbal arguments or even physical confrontations, creating a hostile and emotionally taxing living environment. Shared accommodations, especially when roommates are paired without consideration of compatibility, can lead to ongoing stress. For

international students already navigating the challenges of an unfamiliar academic and social landscape, these conflicts can significantly impact their psychological well-being and hinder their cultural and social adaptation.

One participant shared:

“My roommate doesn’t care about cleaning. Sometimes the room smells bad, and I have to do everything myself. It’s hard to live like that every day.” Participant

This comment highlights a specific hygiene-related conflict in which the participant felt overwhelmed by an imbalance of responsibility. The emotional tone “it’s hard to live like that” emphasizes the long-term strain caused by a lack of cooperation in shared spaces. For an international student, this situation not only affects their sense of cleanliness and comfort but may also lead to feelings of frustration and cultural misunderstanding, particularly if standards of hygiene vary due to cultural differences.

Another student noted:

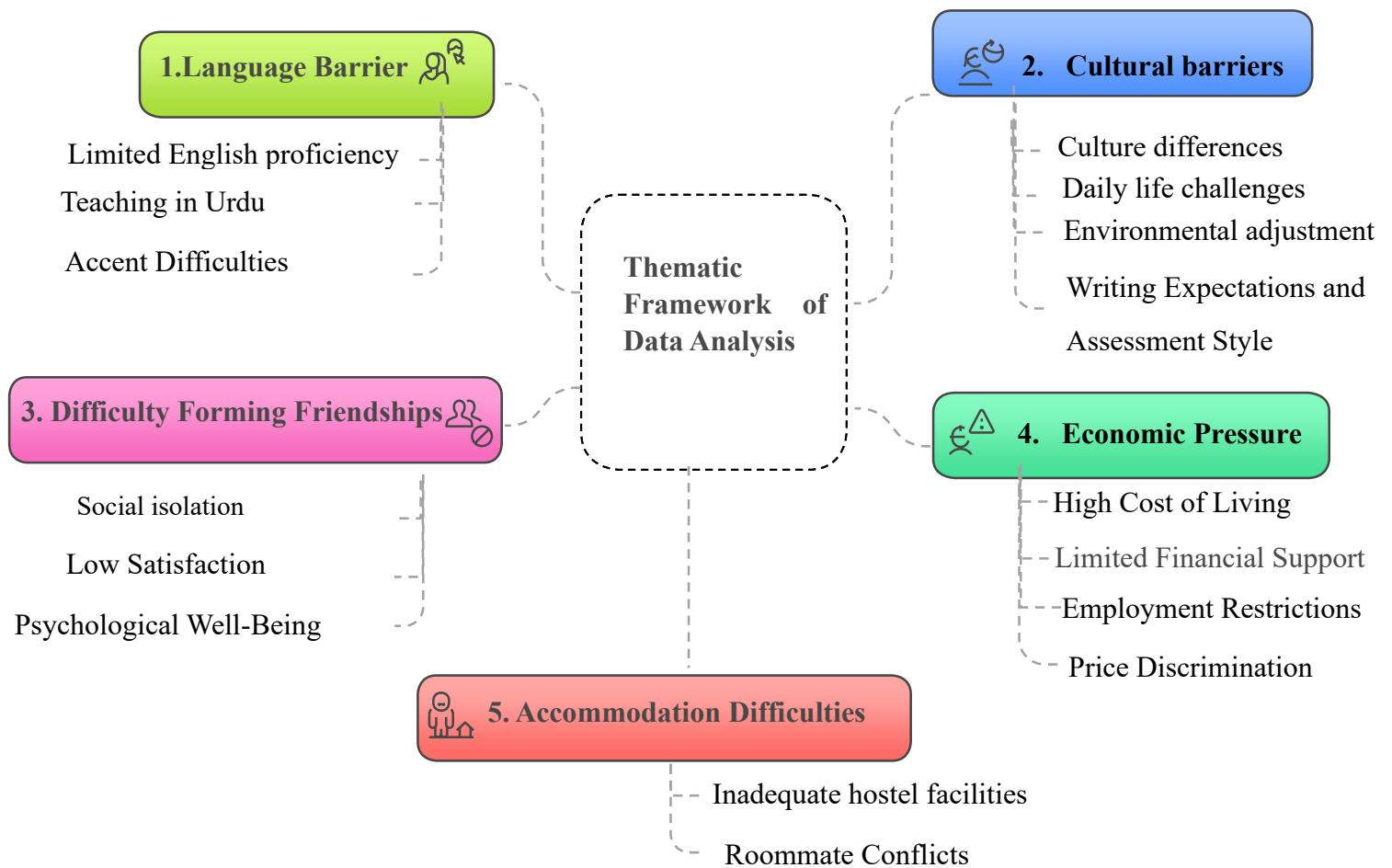
“We don’t understand each other’s way of living. I want to sleep early, but he plays music late at night. I feel tired during classes, but I cannot say anything.” Participant

The quote illustrates how difference in customs and habits can lead to a feeling of communication gap and mismatched lifestyles. The fact that the participant says “I cannot say anything” demonstrates low confidence, most likely because of fears from their culture or a wish to avoid confrontation with an unfamiliar person. Because of this, a person can struggle with suppressing their emotions and feel tired of learning which stops them from adjusting to new tasks. Another person described:

“There was a very serious fight between us. I frequently told him it wasn’t okay to have friends at our place late at night, but he just went on doing it. One night I got angry and started shouting at him. It caused me a lot of stress.” Participant.

It demonstrates that if tension isn’t addressed, people may argue and possibly end up fighting. His talking about repeating the warnings *“I told him many times”* means he did not respect the participant’s boundaries and communication was not effective. Experiencing such events can make students feel less safe and at home, instead of living in an atmosphere of comfort. Failing to resolve roommate issues which hostels do not address, may result in social isolation, mental stress and unstable emotions. Being away from their home country may cause international students to withdraw, be alone or even seek a relocation which all make the process of adapting more complicated. Because there are no formal conflict resolution systems, these difficulties often get worse.

4.6 Mind Map of Qualitative Data Analysis Themes



4.7 Findings Applied to Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) regarding their cultural adaptation and social integration within the university environment. By examining their lived experiences, the research sought to understand how language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, and institutional support systems affect their academic and social adjustment. The goal was to provide practical insights to help IIUI enhance its support structures and foster a more inclusive and responsive environment for its international student community.

4.8 Research Question 1: What challenges do international students face regarding cultural adaptation and social integration at IIUI?

The data indicates that international students at IIUI encounter a range of interconnected challenges that can hinder their cultural adaptation and social integration. These challenges primarily result from language barriers, cultural disorientation, social isolation, and difficulties in academic adjustment.

1. Language Barriers

Language emerged as a core challenge affecting both academic performance and social interactions. Students reported difficulties with English proficiency, unfamiliar accents, and the prevalent use of Urdu in lectures, which they had not anticipated.

“I had a big challenge in class because of Urdu. When I came to Pakistan, I thought education would be entirely in English. But after starting my studies, I realized that teachers mostly speak Urdu.” Participant

This discrepancy between expectations and reality made students feel excluded from classroom discussions, adversely affecting their comprehension and grades. Additionally, limited English fluency hindered their ability to articulate ideas and form relationships with peers.

“Even when I understand something in English, it takes me a long time to read and rewrite it in my own words.” Participant

This quote emphasizes the mental effort involved in processing academic content, illustrating that language serves as a significant barrier to both participation and performance.

2. Culture Shock

Upon arrival, students encountered unfamiliar norms, behaviors, and values that led to discomfort and confusion. Many expressed difficulties in navigating social etiquette, personal boundaries, and public interactions.

“When I arrived at the airport, people were staring at me. In my country, you can’t look at someone for a long time. It felt very uncomfortable.” Participant

Such cultural differences heightened students' self-consciousness and awareness of their outsider status, exacerbating feelings of alienation. Variations in food, privacy norms, and non-verbal communication contributed to their sense of cultural dislocation.

3. Social Isolation and Difficulty Forming Friendships

A common theme was the lack of meaningful social connections with local students. Most participants reported minimal interaction, brief responses, or indifference from peers.

“Even when I tried to talk to classmates, they gave short replies or ignored me. I stopped trying after a while.” Participant

Many students formed close-knit bonds within their own cultural groups, which limited broader integration and reinforced separation.

“I have some friends, but they’re all from my country. I don’t know any Pakistani students closely.”

Participant

This sense of isolation negatively affected their emotional well-being and their sense of belonging within the university community.

4. Psychological and Emotional Struggles

Feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and anxiety were particularly intense, especially during semester breaks when hostels became quiet.

“During the winter break, the hostel was so empty... I cried almost every night.” Participant

Some students resorted to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as sleeping pills or withdrawal from social activities. The lack of culturally sensitive mental health services exacerbated their emotional challenges.

5. Economic Pressure

Financial difficulties, including high tuition fees, excessive rent charges by landlords, and the lack of scholarships for international students, further increased students’ stress levels.

“Sometimes I just stay in my room because I can’t afford to go out with friends.” Participant

“Foreign students are often charged more for rent; they know we don’t have other options.

“Participant

This economic strain limited their ability to engage socially and explore the host culture, further weakening their efforts at adaptation and integration.

4.9 Research Question 2: How do these challenges affect their cultural adaptation and social integration?

The findings reveal that while IIUI offers basic academic and administrative services, its support systems are largely ineffective in addressing the specific needs of international students. Participants consistently identified four key gaps: language accommodation, social engagement opportunities, financial support, and psychological care.

1. Language Exclusion in Instruction

Many students expressed disappointment with the language used in the classroom. Although they anticipated instruction in English, numerous professors switched to Urdu or alternated languages to accommodate local students.

“The teacher starts in English, but then shifts to Urdu when local students don’t understand. I can’t follow the lecture anymore. “Participant

This practice left non-Urdu-speaking students feeling confused, isolated, and unable to engage meaningfully, ultimately undermining their learning and confidence.

2. Lack of Structured Social Integration Efforts

Students reported the absence of formal programs designed to facilitate connections with local students, such as cultural exchange events, buddy systems, or international student societies.

“I only made friends from my own country. There was no effort from the university to help us mix or feel welcomed by local students.” Participant

Without structured social avenues, most students gravitated toward familiar cultural groups, which, while comforting, restricted their exposure to the wider campus community and hindered their integration.

3. Absence of Financial Aid for International Students

Participants pointed out a significant lack of access to scholarships or emergency financial assistance, which left many reliant on family remittances and vulnerable to exploitation.

“There are scholarships, but they’re not for international students... We don’t even know where to ask.” Participant

This systemic exclusion fostered feelings of inequality and neglect, diminishing students’ trust in the institution and constraining their academic and personal growth.

4. Lack of Visible Mental Health Support

Despite evident signs of emotional distress, students reported a lack of awareness of or access to mental health resources.

“I felt depressed and couldn’t sleep. I took sleeping pills every night because I had no one to talk to.” Participant

This indicates a troubling neglect in psychological support systems. The emotional toll of isolation, academic pressure, and cultural dislocation remained unaddressed, exacerbating students' struggles.

In summary, the university's support structures are generic, passive, and underdeveloped, lacking both cultural sensitivity and practical effectiveness. Students' testimonies illustrate that these gaps are not merely inconvenient; they represent barriers to well-being, learning, and retention.

4.10 Research Question 3: What institutional strategies can be implemented to better support international students' cultural adaptation and social integration at IIUI?

Based on students' experiences and suggestions, several evidence-based, student-driven strategies have emerged to enhance institutional responsiveness across key areas of academic, social, financial, and emotional support.

1. Standardize English-Medium Instruction

Students emphasized the need for consistent English instruction, as many were unprepared for classes conducted in Urdu. *“I expected everything to be in English. If the university had informed me earlier, I would have been better prepared.”* Participant

Implementing a clear policy for English-medium teaching and providing accessible course materials would reduce confusion and promote equity in learning.

2. Develop Social Bridging Programs

Students proposed structured initiatives to connect international and local students, such as peer buddy systems, intercultural events, and group mentorship.

“We need something like a welcome club... where new students can meet locals and learn how things work here.” Participant

These programs would help break cultural barriers, alleviate loneliness, and foster a sense of belonging.

3. Introduce Targeted Scholarships and Financial Aid

Many participants highlighted the need for financial support tailored to international students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

“Every semester I worry if my family can send enough money. There should be some help from the university.” Participant

Allocating a percentage of scholarships or emergency grants specifically for international students could significantly alleviate financial stress and improve retention.

4. Establish Mental Health and Counseling Services

Students reported experiencing emotional distress but lacked access to counseling or awareness of available services.

“I felt completely alone... even surrounded by people.” Participant

Culturally sensitive, multilingual counseling services are essential for addressing psychological well-being. Regular check-ins, support groups, and mental health awareness programs can help bridge this gap.

5. Improve Orientation Programs and Pre-Arrival Communication

Some students felt unprepared for the academic and social realities of studying at IIUI.

“They should provide a guide or video before we arrive... so we know what to expect.”

Participant

A comprehensive orientation package covering academic culture, daily life, local etiquette, and language expectations would facilitate a smoother adjustment and reduce the shock of arrival.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This study critically examined the cultural adaptation and social integration experiences of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), a distinguished institution recognized for its cultural diversity and global student body. As international student mobility continues to rise, understanding and supporting these students' transition processes is essential not only for their academic success but also for their emotional and social well-being. The research was grounded in Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975), which underscores the significance of both academic and social integration for students' persistence and satisfaction in higher education. Within this framework, the study explored how international students navigate the complexities of adjusting to a foreign educational environment, particularly within the context of Pakistani academic culture, Islamic social norms, and institutional systems. The study identified a notable institutional gap: while IIUI offers some student services, there is a lack of comprehensive, structured support systems specifically designed for international students. Many arrive with limited knowledge of the host country's language, culture, academic expectations, and social dynamics. In the absence of targeted orientation programs or culturally sensitive guidance, they often experience confusion, marginalization, and emotional distress during their initial months circumstances that can hinder their educational objectives. To address this issue, the research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, facilitating an in-depth exploration of students lived experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of international students (both male and female, undergraduate and postgraduate),

the researcher aimed to uncover not only the challenges faced by students but also how they emotionally and psychologically understood and coped with those challenges. The study's design was intentionally student-centered and interpretive, prioritizing participants' voices and insights to authentically depict their transition journey. Ethical rigor was maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful engagement, ensuring that students could share their stories candidly. Ultimately, this study provided a context-specific investigation into the realities encountered by international students at IIUI, aiming to inform the development of practical, compassionate, and culturally responsive support structures. It contributes to the broader discourse on international education by highlighting the urgent need for inclusive policy reform, improved institutional planning, and empathy-driven student services all essential for fostering a truly global, supportive, and academically vibrant university community.

5.2 Key finds

The findings are based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the participants' experiences, specifically addressing the challenges they faced while adapting to IIUI's academic, cultural, and social environment. The results are organized around recurring themes and subthemes identified in the interview data.

1. Language barriers significantly hinder academic participation.

Many students struggle with English proficiency, which affects their ability to understand lectures, complete assignments, and engage in discussions.

2. Teaching in Urdu disadvantages non-local students.

Lecturers often switch from English to Urdu, particularly when local students have difficulty following in English, inadvertently excluding international students.

3. Differences in pronunciation and accent impact communication.

International students find it challenging to understand local accents and to be understood due to their own accents, leading them to withdraw from class participation.

4. Culture shock is a common and intense initial experience.

Students report emotional stress stemming from unfamiliar social norms, customs, and public behaviors, such as close physical proximity and unsolicited questions.

5. Daily life challenges compound stress.

From overly spicy food to intrusive personal questions, students face unexpected discomforts that hinder their psychological adjustment.

6. Hostel living conditions and climate impact comfort and well-being.

Extreme heat and substandard housing contribute to sleep disruption and academic disengagement.

7. Pakistani exam expectations cause academic strain.

The emphasis on lengthy, memorized answers contrasts sharply with the concise, analytical writing emphasized in many students' prior education.

8. Difficulty forming friendships with local students leads to isolation.

Many international students feel excluded and struggle to connect with Pakistani peers, often forming bonds only with fellow students from their own countries.

9. Social isolation leads to emotional distress.

Students report feelings of loneliness, depression, and invisibility, particularly during the early semesters and holidays when most local students return home.

10. Lack of structured interaction worsens integration.

The absence of organized events or mentorship programs limits opportunities for cultural exchange and local bonding.

11. Some students adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Emotional distress from homesickness and social isolation drives some students to resort to sleeping pills or drugs as a means of coping.

12. Economic pressures restrict participation and add stress.

High living costs, tuition fees, and limited financial support systems hinder students' ability to engage in social or cultural activities.

13. Price discrimination is a common experience international students frequently report being charged more for rent or goods, increasing their financial burden and feelings of exploitation.

14. Lack of scholarships or financial aid for international students increases inequality.

Participants express frustration over being excluded from most financial support systems available to local students.

15. Students express a need for structured orientation and support programs.

Many students recommend enhanced orientation sessions, ongoing mentorship, and clearer information to facilitate their academic and cultural transition.

16. Students experience emotional burnout due to academic and cultural overload.

Unfamiliar academic demands, language barriers, and cultural adjustments contribute to emotional and mental exhaustion, particularly in the first year.

17. Peer group exclusivity among local students creates social distance.

International students often observe that local students form tight-knit groups and show little interest in including them, leading to perceived social coldness and barriers to friendship.

18. Cultural taboos and unfamiliar norms lead to unintentional misunderstandings.

Students report accidentally offending others or feeling uncomfortable due to differing norms in communication, privacy, gender interaction, and personal space.

19. Students form same-nationality groups as a coping mechanism.

Many international students' bond with peers from their home country, creating isolated cultural bubbles. While this can be comforting, it limits broader social and cultural integration.

20. Winter breaks intensify loneliness and depression.

During holidays like winter break, most local students return home, leaving international students on campus and exacerbating feelings of isolation, homesickness, and emotional vulnerability.

5.3 Discussion

The experiences of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) illustrate a complex journey of cultural adaptation and social integration, influenced by linguistic, academic, socio-cultural, and psychological factors. This study, informed by Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975), which emphasizes the importance of academic and social engagement for student success and retention, offers valuable insights into the personal and systemic challenges these students face. The findings not only confirm existing literature but also provide context-specific dimensions unique to IIUI and the Pakistani academic environment.

The language difference made it difficult for immigrants to fit in at university and in the community. International students complained that because they had limited English and no Urdu skills, they found it very difficult to engage in class and communicate with others. The new research agrees with earlier studies showing that language challenges make a big difference in international students' lives (Samir et al., 2008; Nada & Araújo, 2018). Even so, the specific context at IIUI brings about a unique set of problems. The routine of classes in English is common in western countries, but at IIUI, lectures change languages between Urdu and English.

As a result of code-switching, those who do not speak Urdu feel excluded and often confused and this further lowers their belief in themselves in school. Very few academic articles cover these methods, because they tend to focus on places where English is the main language which makes

this study extremely significant. Adjusting to university life also created extra challenges. Students noticed a difference between what happened in their previous schools and the typical examination method required at IIUI which asks for memorized answers and long essays. Their findings agree with the results of Mesidor and Sly (2016) and Andrade (2006) about the problems international students experience in altering to uncommon ways of teaching and learning. Still, these issues are made worse at IIUI because the teaching methods are based on old South Asian ways that put quantity over quality. Having assessment styles that did not match their analytical approach and critical thinking style often saw students from such backgrounds fail and feel lost, not because they didn't have facts but because they were not tested in the right way.

Students' academic difficulties were closely linked to their struggles with cultural adaptation. Upon arrival, many felt disoriented by local customs and social expectations that sharply contrasted with their own. Experiences such as facing intrusive personal questions, encountering unfamiliar norms regarding personal space, and witnessing practices like unsolicited photography led to discomfort and confusion. These situations exemplify the classic manifestations of culture shock, as described by Oberg (2018) and reiterated by Zhou et al. (2008), highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of transitioning to a new cultural environment. Additionally, the Pakistani cultural context characterized by collectivism, conservatism, and strong religious and ethnic identities often intensified students' feelings of otherness. Unlike the more multicultural environments found in Western universities, where diversity initiatives are more developed, international students at IIUI frequently faced subtle social exclusion or passive neglect, reinforcing their sense of isolation.

Social integration proved particularly challenging. Many students expressed a sense of invisibility, feeling unnoticed and uninvited despite being surrounded by peers. The lack of meaningful

interaction with local students, compounded by language barriers and cultural distance, limited their participation in campus life. This aligns with findings by Poyrazli and Grahame (2017), who emphasized the importance of peer relationships in promoting academic and emotional well-being. However, what distinguishes the IIUI context is the absence of structured initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between local and international students. Unlike Western models, where mentorship programs and intercultural events are integral to internationalization strategies, IIUI lacks systematic approaches to facilitate social inclusion. Consequently, many international students retreated into culturally homogeneous groups, seeking comfort among those who shared their language or background while missing opportunities for broader integration.

The effects of all the isolation could be clearly seen in their emotions. Loneliness, homesickness and depression were common feelings among students, especially during holidays when others left the campus. Some students reveal using sleeping tablets or experiencing drug use in hostels which point to undiscovered psychological problems. The results reflect what Yeh and Inose (2013) mentioned, that cultural stigma or lack of awareness about support resources keeps many international students from asking for help. It is made especially difficult at IIUI because mental health services are not always culturally sensitive. Faculty and administrators often miss how much stress affects students which makes it more difficult for them to be involved in academic or social activities. International students faced significant challenges integrating because of economic difficulties. Being a student was stressful because the cost of education was very high, rent was costly and financial resources were hard to find. Many of the participants said that, unlike regular students, they were less likely to get a scholarship and often had few clear pointers on where to find help. Such issues reveal a widespread worry worldwide about finances among international students (Hsu, 2013; Sherry et al., 2009), however, they become worse in the IIUI setting due to

lack of support and openness from the schools. Many people experienced economic hardship which caused them to feel less included by society, less free to study and to live in lower-quality housing.

The results confirm that having good relationships with peers, regular support for their studies or experience with other cultures supports students in adapting. According to Tinto, social and academic involvement are both necessary and affect a student's chance of staying. Even though Tinto's theory was created for Western contexts, it might not resolve all of the problems caused by structural and cultural weak points at IIUI. Issues including ethnolinguistic bias, institutions that do not care and religion-cultural conservatism cause additional barriers to integration and these barriers are not found in traditional models. For this reason, this study advocates changing or increasing Tinto's model when it is applied to international students at Global South universities. This research verifies widespread findings regarding international student challenges and provides new important observations from the cultural, university and language setting of IIUI. This points out how important it is for Pakistan to have tailored help systems, priority for inclusive education and stratagems aimed at bringing communities together for international students in particular. Therefore, this research helps us learn more about international student mobility and integration, stressing how important it is to have tailored policies that help students thrive in different countries.

3.5 Conclusion

This study investigated the cultural adaptation and social integration experiences of international students at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) through a qualitative, phenomenological approach grounded in Tinto's Student Integration Theory. In-depth interviews with international students from diverse backgrounds revealed several interconnected

challenges that significantly affect their academic success, emotional well-being, and integration into the university community.

The findings indicate that language barriers, cultural differences, academic mismatches, psychological stress, and financial difficulties pose substantial obstacles for international students at IIUI. Limited English proficiency, the predominant use of Urdu in instruction, and variations in pronunciation created communication gaps that hindered both academic engagement and social connections. Furthermore, the university's reliance on traditional assessment methods, such as rote memorization and extensive written responses, conflicted with many students' previous academic experiences, resulting in confusion and underperformance.

Culturally, students often experienced situations, customs, and attitudes that were very different from those back home. These differences led to difficulty in day-to-day interactions, feelings of alienation, and culture shock.

The absence of structured social integration initiatives, such as peer networking and intercultural exchange programs, further isolated many students and deprived them of essential emotional support. These social and cultural barriers were intensified by institutional limitations, including a lack of targeted orientation programs, restricted access to financial aid, and insufficient mental health services. Even with these issues, the research confirmed the strong will and determination of international students in a tough environment. Students who were confident in themselves, had prior experience with other cultures or enjoyed the support of peers were more likely to adapt positively, in line with Tinto's view that being involved academically and socially matters a lot for student achievement and retention. Even so, the study indicates that Tinto's model should be

modified to deal with the special social and school conditions found in non-Western contexts such as IIUI.

The study concludes that in order to succeed, international students at IIUI need more extensive, situation-specific support networks. Addressing their needs must extend beyond academic assistance to include culturally responsive mental health services, structured social integration initiatives, clear communication policies, financial aid opportunities, and inclusive teaching practices. These measures are essential not only for enhancing student outcomes but also for fulfilling the university's vision of being a truly global and inclusive institution.

This research provides original insights into the unique challenges and coping strategies of international students in a Pakistani university, an area that remains underrepresented in global scholarship. It emphasizes that successful internationalization involves not only attracting students from abroad but also fostering environments that actively support their full inclusion, growth, and well-being.

3.12 Recommendations

The challenges identified in this study make us recommend actions that support international students in reaching academic success, fitting into the campus culture, and joining the community. Doing these things is important for making our university community more helpful and inclusive.

1. Hire Competent English-speaking Staff

Recruit and train university personnel, especially in administrative roles, academic support, and student services, who are fluent in English to facilitate effective communication and assistance for international students.

This addresses the core challenge of language barriers, where students reported significant difficulties in both academic and daily interactions due to their own limited English proficiency and the accents of staff and faculty.

2. Establish a Well-Equipped International Student Office (ISO)

Create a centralized office staffed by trained professionals to provide consistent support in areas such as visa processing, housing, academic advising, emergency aid, and student welfare.

This is a direct response to the overall finding that existing support systems are largely ineffective and underdeveloped, leaving students to navigate complex administrative, housing, and financial issues on their own.

3. Form a Multinational Student Welcome Committee

Establish a guidance group consisting of senior students from diverse nationalities to assist newcomers with orientation, campus tours, registration, accommodation, and cultural adjustment.

This tackles the problem of social isolation by creating structured opportunities for peer-to-peer support, directly addressing students' feelings of being invisible and their struggle to form initial connections.

4. Implement an Intensive Pre-Semester Orientation Program

Conduct a mandatory orientation that covers academic policies, cultural norms, health services, financial planning, safety, and life in Pakistan to help reduce culture shock and confusion.

This measure is proposed to mitigate the intense culture shock students reported upon arrival, which stemmed from being unprepared for unfamiliar social norms, academic expectations, and daily life challenges.

5. Standardize English as the Primary Language of Instruction

Mandate English-only instruction for all international programs and discourage code-switching to Urdu during lectures to ensure equitable academic access for all students.

This directly addresses the critical finding that lecturers frequently switch to Urdu, which inadvertently excludes non-Urdu-speaking students and significantly hinders their ability to follow lectures and participate in class.

6. Offer English Language and Academic Skills Workshops

Provide regular training in academic writing, note-taking, presentation skills, and research methods to support non-native English speakers in meeting academic expectations.

responds to findings that students struggle with academic tasks due to limited English proficiency, noting it takes them much longer to read and write and that they lack confidence in expressing their knowledge.

7. Offer Free Beginner Urdu Language Courses

Launch beginner-level Urdu language classes for international students to improve their daily communication, promote cultural understanding, and facilitate smoother social integration.

While English is key for academics, this addresses the social aspect of the language barrier, as an inability to speak the local language contributes to social isolation and economic vulnerability, such as being overcharged.

8. Redesign Evaluation and Assessment Methods

Revise exam and assignment formats to include analytical, project-based, and participatory assessments that cater to diverse academic backgrounds and discourage rote learning.

This addresses the academic mismatch and culture shock related to assessment styles, where students felt disadvantaged by the local emphasis on writing lengthy, memorized answers rather than demonstrating analytical understanding.

9. Provide Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Services

Offer confidential counseling and emotional support from professionals who understand the unique psychological challenges faced by international students in cross-cultural contexts.

This is a critical response to the theme of psychological and emotional struggles, where students reported intense loneliness, depression, and a lack of anyone to talk to, with some resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms like sleeping pills.

10. Promote Intercultural Exchange and Integration Activities

Organize monthly cultural events, food festivals, and dialogue forums to encourage interaction, understanding, and friendships between local and international students.

This strategy aims to counter the pervasive social isolation by creating structured, informal settings for interaction, addressing the finding that students struggle to connect with local peers and often retreat into groups.

11. Develop a Financial Aid System for International Students

Create need-based scholarships, tuition waivers, and emergency financial assistance specifically for international students who lack local sponsorship or financial stability.

This directly confronts the theme of economic pressure and the finding that international students feel systematically excluded from financial support, which adds significant stress and limits their participation in university life.

12. Ensure Fair Rental and Housing Conditions

Collaborate with reliable landlords and local housing providers to guarantee fair pricing, transparent contracts, and decent living conditions free from exploitation or discrimination.

This recommendation is based on the finding that students experienced perceived price discrimination, particularly from landlords who charged higher rent to foreigners, exacerbating their financial strain and sense of being exploited.

13. Establish Clear Communication Channels

Set up official email groups, WhatsApp communities, or web portals to keep international students informed about academic deadlines, visa issues, events, and emergency alerts.

This addresses the reported institutional gap where students felt uninformed and disconnected, particularly regarding financial aid and support services, often not even knowing where to ask for help.

14. Offer Peer Mentorship and Buddy Programs

Assign each incoming student a trained local or international “buddy” to help them adjust socially, emotionally, and academically during their first semester.

This provides a direct structural solution to the difficulty students face in forming friendships, creating an initial, welcoming connection that can help prevent the feelings of invisibility and loneliness reported during their first year.

15. Conduct Regular Feedback and Needs Assessments

Institutionalize anonymous surveys and focus groups each semester to assess international student satisfaction and gather recommendations for policy improvements.

The very existence of this thesis demonstrates a gap between institutional perception and student reality. A regular feedback loop ensures that the university can proactively identify and address challenges as they evolve, rather than relying on occasional research.

16. Incorporate Internationalization into Strategic Planning

Integrate international student inclusion into IIUI's long-term strategy by allocating budgets, setting performance goals, and institutionalizing diversity and inclusion training for faculty and staff.

This overarching recommendation addresses the systemic nature of the identified issues. The findings suggest that challenges are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a lack of deep, strategic commitment to international student welfare, which can only be solved through top-down institutional reform.

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3.13Appendix

Interview protocol form

Research Topic: Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration of International Students at International Islamic University Islamabad

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Academic Status: _____

Notes to interviewee

Dear student, I am conducting this research as part of my MS thesis to understand the experiences of international students in adapting to the cultural and social life at IIUI. This study explores international students' cultural adaptation and social integration experiences at IIUI. The goal is to identify the challenges faced by international students, understand the factors that support or hinder their adjustment, and provide recommendations to improve university services for them.

Your insights and experiences are highly valuable to this study. By sharing your thoughts, you will help highlight key issues international students face and contribute to improving policies and support systems at IIUI. Your responses will provide practical recommendations that can help create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for future international students.

The Questions

1. Cultural Adaptation Challenges

2. What cultural and social challenges did you face when you first came to IIUI? _____

3. How did you learn and adapt to local customs and traditions?

4. How did language barriers affect your adjustment to life here?

3. Social Integration

1. How have you been able to build social connections in your new environment at IIUI? **(If YES)** How did your build perform? **If not, go to question 2.**

2. What challenges have you faced in making friends with local and international students?

3. Are there specific social or university-related activities that helped you feel included? **(If YES)** Could you please tell me?

4. How do you perceive the level of support from faculty, staff, and local students in fostering your social integration?

4. Institutional Support and Recommendations

1. How accessible are university resources, such as counseling, academic advising, and student affairs, to international students?

2. Based on your experience, what specific programs or institutional strategies do you recommend IIUI adopt to support international students more effectively?
