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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT EMI UNIVERSITIES IN KAZAKHSTAN: EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES

In the context of higher education globalization and Kazakhstan's active internationalization policies, attracting international students has become a strategic priority. However, research on the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of international students at English-Medium Instruction (EMI) universities in Kazakhstan remains limited. To explore the positive experiences, challenges, and coping strategies employed by undergraduate international students at EMI universities in Kazakhstan. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with seven second- and third-year international students from two EMI universities in Kazakhstan. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study identified three categories of challenges: academic adaptation to new learning environments and workload, linguistic barriers (insufficient proficiency in English, Kazakh, and Russian), and socio-cultural challenges including feelings of isolation, loneliness, and culture shock. Students employed four primary coping strategies: utilizing university resources (academic advisors, international offices), socialization (participation in student clubs and events), learning local languages, and seeking personal space for emotional regulation. The findings indicate the need for a comprehensive support system for international students, including language training, cultural orientation programs, and enhanced interaction between local and international students. The results can inform the improvement of internationalization policies in Kazakhstani universities.

Keywords: international students, Kazakhstan, EMI universities, academic adaptation, linguistic barriers.

Introduction

The globalization of higher education has fundamentally transformed the landscape of academic mobility worldwide. In recent decades, the number of students pursuing education outside their home countries has increased dramatically, rising from 1.6 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million by 2022 [1]. This phenomenon reflects broader trends in internationalization, where nations seek to enhance their global competitiveness, foster cross-cultural understanding, and diversify their educational environments [2]. Kazakhstan, since gaining independence in 1991, has actively embraced internationalization as a central component of its higher education reform agenda [3].

The internationalization of Kazakhstan's higher education system has been driven by several strategic initiatives. The State Program for Education and Science Development 2020–2025 explicitly identifies the attraction of international students as a key objective, alongside the establishment of branches of leading foreign universities and the creation of a unified Central Asian educational space [4]. The Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023–2029 further elaborates these goals, setting targets for increasing the international student population and enhancing the global visibility of Kazakhstani universities [5]. By the 2022–2023 academic year, 26,080 international students (4.5% of total enrollment) were studying in Kazakhstani higher education institutions, representing a steady increase from previous years [6].

Central to these internationalization efforts has been the development of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) universities. EMI is defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in contexts where the majority of the population does not speak English as a first language [7]. In Kazakhstan, EMI universities have emerged as primary destinations for international students, offering programs taught entirely in English and providing a familiar linguistic environment for students from diverse backgrounds [8]. Nazarbayev University, established in 2010 as a flagship institution, exemplifies this model, with a strategic goal of enrolling 10% international students by 2025 [9].

Despite the growing presence of international students in Kazakhstani EMI universities, research on their experiences remains notably scarce. Existing studies have examined various aspects of internationalization, including policy frameworks [10], institutional strategies [11], and the general challenges faced by international students [12]. Some scholars have investigated international students' motivation to study in Kazakhstan, identifying push-pull factors such as educational costs, scholarship opportunities, and geopolitical considerations [13]. Others have explored academic and sociocultural adjustment, highlighting the critical role of language proficiency in facilitating adaptation [14]. Psychological adaptation and mental health among international students have also received attention [15].

However, a significant gap persists in understanding the lived experiences of undergraduate international students specifically within the EMI context in Kazakhstan. Previous research has not systematically examined the coping strategies these students employ to navigate academic, linguistic, and socio-cultural challenges. This gap is particularly important given the unique characteristics of Kazakhstan as a host country: a multilingual environment (Kazakh and Russian), a post-Soviet educational tradition, and a distinct cultural context that may present unfamiliar challenges for students from diverse backgrounds [16]. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing effective support systems, enhancing student retention, and achieving the internationalization goals articulated in national policy documents.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the following research questions:

1. What are the positive experiences of international students at EMI universities in Kazakhstan?

2. What challenges do undergraduate international students face while pursuing their studies at EMI universities in Kazakhstan?

3. What coping strategies do international students employ to effectively address and surmount these challenges?

The study is guided by Lysgaard's U-Curve theory of cultural adjustment [17], which provides a conceptual framework for understanding the adaptation process of sojourners in new cultural environments. According to this theory, individuals experience four stages of cultural adjustment: the initial "honeymoon" phase characterized by excitement and fascination, followed by a "disillusionment" or "culture shock" phase marked by frustration and difficulty, then an "adjustment" phase where gradual adaptation occurs, and finally a "mastery" phase where individuals function effectively in the new culture. This framework offers a lens for interpreting international students' experiences and the strategies they employ to navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

Materials and research methods

Research Approach and Design. This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals and understanding the essence of a phenomenon as it is perceived by those who have experienced it [18]. This approach allows researchers to go beyond surface-level observations and capture the subjective meanings that participants attach to their experiences [19]. The choice of

phenomenology aligns with the study's aim to understand international students' experiences in depth, focusing on their personal narratives and the meanings they construct from their time in Kazakhstan.

Research Site. The research was conducted at two EMI universities in Kazakhstan. To protect the confidentiality of participants and institutions, the universities are referred to by pseudonyms: AA University and XY University. Both institutions are recognized for their significant populations of undergraduate international students and for their commitment to English-medium instruction. AA University is characterized by a highly internationalized campus environment with dedicated support services for international students, while XY University represents a more traditional Kazakhstani university with a growing international student population. This selection allowed for a comparative exploration of how institutional contexts shape international student experiences.

Participants. Participants were recruited using criterion sampling under the purposive sampling method [20]. Criterion sampling involves selecting individuals who meet predetermined criteria relevant to the research phenomenon. For this study, the inclusion criteria were: (a) being an international student (i.e., not holding Kazakhstani citizenship), (b) enrolled in the second or third year of undergraduate studies, and (c) having completed at least one academic year in Kazakhstan. Second- and third-year students were specifically targeted because they have sufficient experience in the host country to reflect on their adaptation process, unlike first-year students who may still be in the initial adjustment phase, and they can more readily recall their challenges compared to fourth-year students who may have fully adapted.

Seven participants were recruited, a number consistent with phenomenological studies, which typically involve 5 to 25 participants to achieve depth of analysis without overwhelming data.

Table 1 - Demographic Information of Participants

Participant Code	Gender	Home Country	University	Year of Study	Duration in Kazakhstan	Ethnicity
P1_UZ_XY	Male	Uzbekistan	XY University	2nd year	2 years	Ethnic Kazakh
P2_FR_AA	Female	France	AA University	2nd year	2 years	Algerian
P3_FR_AA	Male	France	AA University	2nd year	2 years	French
P4_UZ_XY	Female	Uzbekistan	XY University	3rd year	3 years	Ethnic Kazakh
P5_ID_AA	Male	Indonesia	AA University	2nd year	2 years	Indonesian
P6_AM_XY	Female	Armenia	XY University	3rd year	8 years	Armenian
P7_MY_XY	Female	Malaysia	XY University	2nd year	2 years	Pakistani

The participants represented diverse geographic origins, including: Uzbekistan, France, Indonesia, Armenia, and Malaysia. This diversity was intentional, as it allowed for exploration of how experiences vary across different cultural backgrounds, linguistic competencies, and lengths of stay in Kazakhstan.

Data Collection. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that balances structure with flexibility. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to follow a predetermined set of questions while remaining responsive to participants' emerging insights and allowing for elaboration on topics of particular relevance to individual experiences. This format was particularly appropriate for this study, as it enabled in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The interview protocol was developed in three languages (English, Kazakh, and Russian) to accommodate participants' linguistic preferences. The protocol consisted of open-ended questions organized around three main themes corresponding to the research questions: positive experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Given that many participants returned to their home countries during the winter holiday period, interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with explicit participant consent. Interviews were conducted between November 27 and December 15, 2023.

Data Analysis. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedures outlined by Creswell. The analysis proceeded through several iterative stages. First, interviews were transcribed manually to ensure accuracy and preserve nuances in participants' responses. Transcriptions were then read multiple times to achieve familiarization with the data. Next, open coding was applied to identify meaningful segments of text. Codes were generated inductively from the data, capturing both anticipated themes related to the research questions and unexpected themes that emerged from participants' narratives. Through iterative review, initial codes were grouped into broader categories, which were then refined into final themes.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Graduate School of Education Institutional Research Ethics Committee at Nazarbayev University prior to data collection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their rights. Informed consent was obtained in writing before interviews commenced. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and anonymization of university names. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher.

Results and discussion

The findings are organized according to the three research questions, with each section presenting thematic analyses of participants' experiences. The results are discussed in relation to Lysgaard's U-Curve theory and existing literature on international student adaptation.

Positive Experiences of International Students. The analysis revealed that international students' positive experiences varied according to the duration of their stay in Kazakhstan and their proficiency in local languages. Participants consistently highlighted the welcoming atmosphere of their universities and local communities. A participant from France described her experience:

"It's an incredible experience because I think everything here is easy for international students, especially at AA University. When I first came, people were very welcoming and kind." (P2_FR_AA)

This sentiment was echoed by a participant from Indonesia:

"The university has been supportive, offering resources that aid adaptation. Despite cultural differences, the local community has been welcoming, providing a sense of belonging. People are open and ready to help in different situations, which I am grateful for." (P5_ID_AA)

These findings align with the first phase of Lysgaard's U-Curve theory, the "honeymoon" stage, characterized by initial excitement and fascination with the new environment [17]. The positive reception described by participants appears to have contributed to this initial positive adjustment.

For some participants, studying in Kazakhstan represented a significant life transition, described as a "new chapter." A participant from Algeria who had previously experienced discrimination in France explained:

"I faced racism and discrimination in France. I decided to stop my studies in France because of this issue, and so after stopping my studies, I didn't know what I would do and was just thinking about restarting a new university chapter. So, my parents introduced me to Kazakhstan… I didn't face issues I had encountered in France." (P2_FR_AA)

This narrative illustrates the transformative potential of international study, where a new environment can offer opportunities for personal renewal and escape from prior difficulties. This finding resonates with research by Wang and Hannes, who highlight the role of cultural and educational immersion in fostering a sense of renewal and personal development among international students.

Challenges of Adaptation to New Academic Environment. Despite positive experiences, participants faced significant academic challenges that reflected the "disillusionment" phase of the U-Curve theory, where initial enthusiasm gives way to frustration as the realities of daily life in a new culture become apparent.

The most frequently reported academic challenge was adapting to the new academic environment and curriculum. Participants described the study load as "massive" and the expectations as substantially different from their previous educational experiences. A participant from Uzbekistan explained:

"After the education system in Uzbekistan, it was challenging for me to study at university here. There, I face a different workload. It was a massive workload for the first time in Kazakhstan, but now I know how to study and do assignments." (P4_UZ_XY)

This challenge was compounded by participants' initial expectations about the academic rigor of their universities. Several participants had anticipated that their studies would be relatively easy, given that their university was not highly ranked in global league tables. This expectation was quickly contradicted by the demanding academic requirements they encountered. The discrepancy between expectations and reality created additional stress, as participants had to quickly revise their assumptions about academic life in Kazakhstan. This finding aligns with Zhou et al., who found that unrealistic expectations about host country experiences can exacerbate adjustment difficulties.

The academic challenges identified in this study resonate with findings from other contexts. Research on international students in the United Kingdom and the United States has similarly documented difficulties related to differing educational systems, unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, and demanding academic workloads.

Linguistic Challenges. Linguistic barriers emerged as a critical factor affecting both academic performance and social integration. Participants who were not proficient in Russian or Kazakh reported feeling excluded when their peers shifted to local languages during group work and informal interactions. A participant from Algeria described a particularly poignant experience:

"I was in the lab, and everyone spoke Kazakh and Russian. And I was the only one there. And I felt very left out, you know, I was like, where am I? Am I in the right place?" (P2_FR_AA)

This sense of exclusion extended beyond the classroom to everyday interactions in the local community. Participants who did not speak Russian or Kazakh found it difficult to communicate with shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and other community members, limiting their ability to navigate daily life independently. This finding is consistent with research by Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, who found that inadequate language abilities constrain international students' ability to form friendships with locals.

In contrast, participants who were proficient in Russian or Kazakh reported significantly smoother adaptation. A participant from Uzbekistan noted:

"I speak Russian and Kazakh languages, therefore I easily interact with local people and made friends quickly." (P1_UZ_XY)

For participants studying in EMI environments, insufficient English proficiency also posed challenges. Some participants found it difficult to understand lectures, analyze readings, and express themselves in academic writing. Research by McMahon similarly found that English proficiency serves as a "gateway" to academic and social success for international students, with those lacking proficiency facing substantial barriers.

Socio-Cultural Challenges and Culture Shock. Participants from XY University reported socio-cultural challenges that significantly impacted their experiences. These challenges included feelings of isolation, loneliness, and difficulty forming meaningful relationships with local students. A participant from Uzbekistan described a particularly difficult living situation:

"Even with my roommate, we do not talk, and sometimes I feel lonely and miss my country… my parents ask me, 'Who's your roommate?' But I didn't know what to say because I didn't know with whom I lived." (P1_UZ_XY)

This finding resonates with research by Hendrickson et al., who found that limited interaction with local students and peers contributes significantly to feelings of loneliness among international students.

Another participant from Uzbekistan described a traumatic experience that highlighted the absence of expected social support:

"My roommate, she was not friendly with me, did not offer any help. It's just she was on her own and did not even ask how I was doing. I tried talking to her, but she always ignored me." (P4_UZ_XY)

This participant had broken her leg and expected, based on her cultural background, that her roommate would offer assistance and emotional support. The absence of this support compounded her physical difficulties with emotional distress, illustrating how cultural differences in expectations about interpersonal relationships can create significant adjustment challenges.

Beyond interpersonal difficulties, participants reported experiencing culture shock related to broader cultural differences. A participant from Malaysia described what she called a "no smile culture" in Kazakhstan:

"There's no smile culture here at all, right? So if you go to Malaysia, people are just smiling at you… people here are not that approachable, helpful, you know, hard to talk to." (P7_MY_XY)

This observation reflects a common aspect of culture shock: the disorientation that occurs when familiar cultural cues are absent or replaced by unfamiliar ones. The participant's experience highlights how subtle cultural differences can significantly affect international students' sense of belonging and comfort.

Coping Strategies. *Utilizing University Support and Resources.* The most frequently reported coping strategy was seeking help from university resources, particularly academic advisors, professors, and international student offices. A participant from France explained:

"Whenever I have an issue concerning my studies or something, I ask my advisor, and she's always ready to help me and has always resolved my problems." (P2_FR_AA)

Research by Akanwa similarly found that the availability of support services significantly influences international students' success and well-being.

Socialization as a Coping Strategy. Participants actively engaged in social activities as a means of overcoming challenges. Joining student clubs was identified as particularly beneficial. A participant from Indonesia described:

"I joined international student groups and participated in cultural events, fostering a supportive network." (P5_ID_AA)

These findings align with research by Zhou et al., who found that extracurricular activities help students forge meaningful connections and facilitate cultural exchange.

Learning Local Languages. Another strategy participants employed was actively learning local languages. A participant from France described his approach:

"My challenges were related to my poor language skills, and I did my best to try to hear what people were saying, learn it, and adapt it to myself to use it. That's how I managed to go shopping." (P3_FR_AA)

This participant also emphasized the symbolic importance of learning local languages as a sign of respect for the host country. This finding aligns with Kim's assertion that language competence is crucial for effective cultural adjustment.

Seeking Privacy as a Coping Strategy. A unique coping strategy identified was seeking privacy for emotional regulation. One participant described:

"Whenever I'm having a bad day, I would go out and treat myself… go for junk food, have coffee when facing challenges." (P7_MY_XY)

This finding reflects the diversity of coping strategies that individuals employ and aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory, which recognizes the importance of emotion-focused strategies in managing psychological distress.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of undergraduate international students at EMI universities in Kazakhstan. The findings reveal that international students' experiences are shaped by multiple factors, including the duration of their stay, proficiency in local languages, and the institutional context of their university.

The study identified three primary categories of challenges: (1) academic adaptation to new environments and curricula; (2) linguistic barriers; and (3) socio-cultural challenges, including feelings of isolation, loneliness, and culture shock. In response, students employed four main coping strategies: (1) utilizing university resources; (2) socialization through student clubs and events; (3) learning local languages; and (4) seeking privacy for emotional regulation.

The findings have significant implications for policy and practice. Universities should strengthen orientation programs, provide targeted language support, promote interaction between local and international students, and ensure counseling services are culturally sensitive and accessible. As Kazakhstan continues to pursue its internationalization goals, understanding and addressing the needs of international students will be essential for attracting and retaining this important population.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНДЕ ОҚЫТАТЫН ЖОҒАРЫ ОҚУ ОРЫНДАРЫНДАҒЫ ШЕТЕЛДІК СТУДЕНТТЕР: ТӘЖІРИБЕСІ, ҚИЫНДЫҚТАРЫ ЖӘНЕ ЕҢСЕРУ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫ

Жоғары білімнің жаһандануы және Қазақстанның интернационалдандыру саясаты аясында шетелдік білім алушыларды тарту стратегиялық басымдыққа айналды. Алайда, қазақстандық ағылшын тілінде білім беретін университеттеріндегі шетелдік білім алушылардың тәжірибесі, проблемалары және қиындықтарды жеңу стратегиялары туралы зерттеулер шектеулі. Қазақстандағы ағылшын тілінде білім беретін университеттерінде оқитын бакалавриат шетелдік білім алушыларының оң тәжірибелерін, қиындықтарын және оларды жеңу стратегияларын зерттеу. Феноменологиялық сапалық зерттеу шеңберінде Қазақстанның екі ағылшын тілінде білім беретін университетінде оқитын екінші және үшінші курс жеті шетелдік білім алушымен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат жүргізілді. Деректерді талдау тақырыптық талдау әдісімен жүзеге асырылды.

Зерттеу қиындықтардың үш тобын анықтады: жаңа академиялық ортаға және оқу жүктемесіне бейімделу, тілдік кедергілер (ағылшын, қазақ және орыс тілдерін жеткіліксіз меңгеру), әлеуметтік-мәдени қиындықтар, соның ішінде оқшаулану, жалғыздық сезімі және мәдени шок. Білім алушылар қиындықтарды жеңу үшін төрт негізгі стратегияны қолданды: университет ресурстарына жүгіну (академиялық кеңесшілер, халықаралық кеңселер), әлеуметтену (студенттік клубтар мен іс-шараларға қатысу), жергілікті тілдерді үйрену және эмоционалды реттеу үшін жеке кеңістік іздеу. Нәтижелер шетелдік білім алушыларға тілдік дайындықты, мәдени-бағдарлау бағдарламаларын және жергілікті және шетелдік білім алушылар арасындағы өзара әрекеттестікті күшейтуді қамтитын кешенді қолдау жүйесін құру қажеттілігін көрсетеді. Алынған мәліметтер қазақстандық университеттердегі интернационалдандыру саясатын жетілдіру үшін пайдаланылуы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: шетелдік білім алушылар, Қазақстан, EMI университеттері, академиялық бейімделу, тілдік кедергілер.

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ИНОСТРАННЫЕ СТУДЕНТЫ В КАЗАХСТАНСКИХ ВУЗАХ С АНГЛИЙСКИМ ЯЗЫКОМ ОБУЧЕНИЯ: ОПЫТ, ТРУДНОСТИ И СТРАТЕГИИ ПРЕОДОЛЕНИЯ

В условиях глобализации высшего образования и активной политики интернационализации Казахстана привлечение иностранных обучающихся становится стратегическим приоритетом. Однако исследования, посвященные опыту, проблемам и стратегиям преодоления трудностей иностранных обучающихся в казахстанских университетах с английским языком обучения (EMI), остаются ограниченными. Изучить позитивный опыт, трудности и стратегии преодоления, которые используют иностранные обучающиеся бакалавриата в EMI университетах Казахстана. В рамках феноменологического качественного исследования проведены полуструктурированные интервью с семью иностранными обучающимися второго и третьего курсов из двух EMI университетов Казахстана. Анализ данных осуществлялся методом тематического анализа. Исследование выявило три группы трудностей: академическая адаптация к новой учебной среде и учебной нагрузке, языковые барьеры (недостаточное владение английским, казахским и русским языками), социокультурные вызовы, включая чувство изоляции, одиночества и культурный шок. Обучающие использовали четыре основные стратегии преодоления: обращение к университетским ресурсам (академические консультанты, международные офисы), социализацию (участие в студенческих клубах и мероприятиях), изучение местных языков и поиск личного пространства для эмоциональной регуляции. Результаты свидетельствуют о необходимости создания комплексной системы поддержки иностранных обучающихся, включающей языковую подготовку, культурно-ориентационные программы и усиление взаимодействия между местными и иностранными обучающимися. Полученные данные могут быть использованы для совершенствования политики интернационализации в казахстанских университетах.

Ключевые слова: иностранные обучающиеся, Казахстан, EMI университеты, академическая адаптация, языковые барьеры.

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