FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ADAPTABILITY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS. A PILOT STUDY ON FIRST-YEAR DENTISTRY STUDENTS IN ROMANIA

Iulia-Diana Muraru[1], Magdalena Iorga[1*], Catalina Munteanu[1], Beatrice-Gabriela Ioan[2]

[1]Behavioral Sciences Department, Faculty of Medicine, "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy- Iasi, Romania
[2] Legal Medicine Department, Faculty of Medicine, "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy- Iasi, Romania

*Corresponding author:
Iorga Magdalena, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Gr. T. Popa" Email: magdalena.iorga@umfiasi.ro

Abstract
The aim of the study is to identify the factors that increase the risk for difficulties related to the process of acculturation among freshmen international students in Romania. **Material and methods**: 85 international students were included in the research. A socio-demographic data sheet and items targeting the factors that influence acculturative stress were administrated. Data was analyzed using SPSS program, version 21. **Results**: Mean age of the sample is 20.43 (±3.64), with a homogenous sample of participants (45.9% were male and 54.1% female). Students revealed they are facing problems such as: having issues understanding and learning Romanian language (49.4%, N=42), problems with the schedule (41.2%, N=35), weather (28.2%, N=24), food (27.1%, N=23), academic problems (25.9%, N=22), or local transportation (21.2%, N=18). Distance from home, corruption, politics, discrimination, homesickness, lack of local attractions and the presence of insects were also factors mentioned by students. Gender differences were also identified. **Conclusion**: Awareness and understanding of factors that contribute to a high level of acculturation stress can allow educational institutions to offer social and financial structures to help international students.

Keywords: adaptability, international students, acculturative stress, dentistry, romania

INTRODUCTION

The process of accommodation of students to a new culture is influenced by multiple factors such as personality traits, the purpose and length of their migration, social and cultural characteristics, family related aspects, religious tolerant environment, social support offered by community, institutions or friends, economic difficulties and host-country related factors. In Western European countries, acculturative stress was found to be related to numerous factors like personality factors, social and parental support, cultural similarities or geo-comfortability (1-5). Some studies revealed that social support and psychological adjustment are very important during the process of acculturation. The psychological well-being during academic years interferes with academic results (6-7).

Studying for a medical degree is a particularly stressful situation for

international students due to a full-time schedule (theoretical and practical sessions, intensive evaluation periods and shorter holidays), host-culture particularities (students have to deal with local patients and use the host-country's language) and the fact that medical studies are the longest academic formation period. Studies mention that the length of time spent in a host country is strongly related to the accommodation in the new country. Short-term international students were found to perceive themselves better socially and academically integrated than full-time international students, probably because short-term students are more often invited to attend academic programs meanwhile international students must adjust to the cultural and social aspects of the host country (8, 9).

The acculturation process is systematically studied in Western European countries but less investigated in Eastern European countries. Romania, in the last two decades, represented an interesting country of destination for those who wanted to become doctors. Previous studies focusing on international students studying in Romania revealed some factors related to their decision to choose this country for their academic formation. The main reasons were related to socio-economic factors such as cheap daily expenses, low cost for academic taxes, accommodation and city transport. Also, their decision was influenced by family (one of the parents studied in Romania or they have a relative enrolled in the same university) or friends. Romanian medical universities seem to be attractive due to their social facilities, low costs and safe environment. The temperature and food were found to be the most uncomfortable aspects that students must deal with during their stay in Romania (10, 11).

The aim of the study was to identify factors that increase the risk for difficulties related to the process of acculturation among freshmen international students enrolled in a dentistry faculty in Iasi, Romania.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

A number of 100 questionnaires were delivered to freshman international medical students enrolled in a dentistry faculty. They were asked to take part in the research and to fill in the questionnaire. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of data and the use of results. A number of 87 were returned to the researchers and 85 of them were included in the study. The exclusion criteria were questionnaires not fully filled in and returned after the deadline. The registered response rate was 85%.

Material and Methods:

The printed datasheet gathered socio-demographic information like gender, age, country of birth, the country they lived in. Also, a short questionnaire was specially constructed for this study and contains open-ended items concerning the possible difficulties they encountered when moving into Romania.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics version 21. Means, standard deviations and percentages were used for descriptive analysis and Chi-square tests in order to test the associations between gender and difficulties with studying in Romania.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic data

The mean age for the sample is 20.43 ($\pm$3.64), with a minimum of 17 and a maximum of 38. The proportion of female

(54.1%, N=46) and male participants (45.9%, N=39) is quite balanced for a medical University. The students declared that they had no siblings (11.8%, N=10), and one (25.9%, N=22), two (31.8%, N=27), three (15.3%, N=13), four (10.6%, N=9), five (2.4%, N=2) and six siblings (2.4%, N=2).

The majority of the participants were from Greece (36.5%), Israel (12.9%), Taiwan (9.4%) and Italy (8.2%), Jordan and Finland (2.4%). Other countries were less represented: Lebanon, Austria, Portugal, United States of America, Ireland, Russia, and Spain (1.2%).

Difficulties adapting to life in Romania: transportation, language barriers and country's climate

Analyzing the answers, we obtained the following results:
- 21.2% (N=18) of the students declared they had problems concerning local transportation.
- 41.2% (N=35) of the participants mentioned that they have problems with the schedule: the classes are too early, they do not have a specific time to eat, lack of free time.

Almost half of them (49.4%, N=42) stated that they have problems learning and understanding the Romanian language and more than one quarter of them declared they have problems with country climate (winter season).

More than a quarter (27.1% , N=23) of the international students stated that they had problems with their dietary habits, mentioning that there is a lack of certain type of foods from their country of origin; that there is a low number of non-fast-food locations in the university campus from where they could provide lunches. Students also mentioned that they had a poor adaptation to a high lipid diet that is specific to Romanian traditional foods.

More than a quarter (25.9%, N=22) of the students disclosed that they had some of the following academic difficulties: (a) poor university organization; (b) inadequate attitude of some teachers; (c) too many tests.

24.7% (N=21) of the participants revealed some social problems:
- difficulties establishing new interpersonal relationships;
- poor knowledge of an international language among locals, especially English;
- lack of politeness from locals;
- problems with neighbors,
- discrimination - overpricing for accommodation rates (just because they are foreign students).

Table 1. Social and academic-related difficulties

Difficulties	N	%
Local transportation	18	21.2
Academic schedule	35	41.2
Romanian language	42	49.4
Country climate	24	28.2
Food /dietary habits	23	27.1
Academic-related issues	22	25.9
Social integration	21	24.7

A smaller percentage of the participants also mentioned the following difficulties: cultural differences, homesickness, distance from home, the presence of local insects.

Among other difficulties students named corruption, politics, discrimination, local problems, and lack of local attractions.

Table 2. Various difficulties adapting to life in Romania

	N	%
Cultural differences	2	2.4
Homesickness (missing their parents; absence from family events)	12	14.1
Home distance	6	7.1
Insects	2	2.4
Corruption	2	2.4
Politics	2	2.4
Discrimination (by teachers and locals)	4	4.7
Local problems (infrastructure, poor organization of local services)	5	5.9
Lack of local attractions (reduced number of gyms and youth cultural events)	4	4.7

Gender differences

The results of the Chi-square tests showed two significant associations. The first one concerns issued with the schedule ($\chi 2(1) = 5.006$, $p = .025$): female students are more likely to report having difficulties with the schedule (68.8%) than male students (31.4%). The second association concerns homesickness ($\chi 2(1) = 4.803$, $p = .028$): female students are more likely to homesickness (83.3%) than male students (16.7%).

DISCUSSION

The present study showed that international students from the Dentistry have difficulties in adjusting to the new culture. The most stressful factors mentioned by the interviewed subjects were language, academic schedule, language barriers and country's climate, homesickness, social relationships and dietary habits. Gender is a risk factor concerning difficulties adjusting to the academic schedule and homesickness.

Our results are congruent with other identified in the scientific literature. For example, the fact that international students experience homesickness and loneliness is systematically reported by many studies from different countries. For example, in the United States, Simmons et al. (12) showed that Korean international students were significantly lonelier than US university students and Poyrazli and Lopez (13) found that many international students were extremely homesick and lonely. In Australia, Sawir et al (14) identified high rates of loneliness among international students, especially *cultural loneliness*, triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment.

The absence of social support is an important factor that increases the level of loneliness among internationals students. Our study identified that missing family

members and friends represents one important reason for stress. Tsai et all (15) identified that social support is important among freshman international students. The authors also found that those with higher levels of social self-efficacy had a proportionally higher number of American friends among colleagues and co-workers during their 1st semester of study in the United States. Homesickness and loneliness are usually reported to be related to mental health and this represents an important reason for the academic community to provide psychological support for international students in need (16).

We also identified that country climate is one of the main problems for some students. This factor is also reflected by the scientific literature. For example, a study conducted in Malaysia identified climate-related problems (along with culture and care) as one of the most stressful factors experienced by international students (17). Furthermore, a study from Turkey showed that international students were interested in studying in countries similar to their own. Geographical proximity and cultural, historical, religious and ethnic affinities seemed to be very important in international students' decisions to study in Turkey (18).

Students mentioned food among their difficulties adapting to Romania, especially to the high lipid content. Subjects reported that it is challenging and almost impossible to find their familiar taste among Romanian dishes and that they have difficulties in feeling comfortable with Romanian food. Apart from the lack of familiar foods, students also pointed out that there is a lack of healthy food in the campus, stating that there are more fast-food restaurants nearby than healthy food providers. This problem was identified in many other countries when international students were asked about their comfortability with food. For example, in a study conducted in the United Kingdom, international students criticized local English food, mentioning that it is bland, fattening, and unhealthy and declared that they are more attracted by dishes prepared by their international friends than local meals (19).

Our results showed that international students find it difficult to adjust to language. Students find it difficult to be proficient in English (for academic purposes) and also learn Romanian (for daily living). Our study is not the only one stressing the importance of language in the process of acculturation. In many studies, language proficiency proved to decrease the level of acculturative stress and to predict academic performance (20).

Social integration and perceived discrimination were mentioned as stressful by the students in our sample during their first semester. These findings are similar to those identified by Duru & Poyrazly (21) among Turkish students studying in USA or by Kraahe et al in international students in UK and Germany (22). In our study, about 4.7% of students mentioned discrimination as being one important factor that increases their stress. Unfavorable experiences and relations with host nationals have been found to seriously affect the psychological well-being of non-domestic students (23). Feeling discriminated will increase the risk for international students to marginalize themselves, to avoid contact with local population and to diminish relationship with colleagues. Berry and Sabatier (24) showed that, in the face of discrimination, young immigrants tend to reject the dominant culture. Also, perceived discrimination will determine individuals to embrace their own ethnic background to the detriment of integration and adaptation to the new culture (24).

Academic staff must pay considerable attention to student well-being in order to increase the ability to attract a larger number

of well-prepared international students. The results of our study showed that there are variables that interfere with students' well-being during the process of acculturation. Some studies indicated a significant decline in self-reports of psychological well-being during academic years among international students, increasing the risk for social inadaptation and rejection of host culture (25,26). Therefore, it is imperative for educators working with international students to be aware of the importance of cultural differences. Adjusting their communication and interaction with multicultural groups will increase the level of adaptation of students to the new culture.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. Firstly, a low number of students was included in the research. Secondly, we included only freshman students, so the results cannot be generalized. Thirdly, there is an unbalanced number of students from different countries. For example, almost a third of the students came from Greece and only a very small number from other countries. Considering these reasons, results cannot be generalized for all dentistry population studying in Romania, but results are important for future studies.

CONCLUSION

International education is becoming more and more important in higher education and students can easily benefit from the advantages it offers. Most of the students leave their country of origin to access different study programs and often stay in the country where they studied. The need to adapt to the norms and customs of the country in which they study can lead to the stress of acculturation among international students and to the deterioration of their health. Understanding the factors that contribute to a high level of acculturative stress can allow educational institutions to offer social (culturally oriented and mentoring) and financial structures to help international students.

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