

Primary Sources of Acculturative Stress among Students Pursuing Higher Education

*Malsawmkimi, **Abha Shree

**Research Scholar, Department of Education, Mizoram University (A Central University), Aizawl, Mizoram, (India); Email: meskay0825@gmail.com*

***Corresponding Author
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Mizoram University (A Central University), Aizawl, Mizoram, (India); Email: abhashree16@gmail.com*

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out the primary sources and the level of acculturative stress among non-resident students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Mizoram. It also aims to study if there is a significant difference between males and females on acculturative stress among non-resident students. The sample of the study consists of 51 non-resident students of Mizoram University. A self-developed Acculturative Stress Scale for non-resident students in HEIs in Mizoram was used as the research tool. The tool consists of 34 items with six dimensions: homesickness, food preferences, social behaviour and language, cultural values, prejudice and racial discrimination, and isolation. This study used statistical techniques such as mean, standard deviations, and t-test. Findings showed that most students (n=41) fall on the “mild” level of acculturative stress. The remaining students (n=10) fall on the “high” level of acculturative stress. The primary source of acculturative stress is found to be a language barrier. There is no significant difference found concerning gender on the level of acculturative stress.

Keywords: Acculturative stress, higher education institutions, HEIs, language barrier, non-resident students

Introduction

With the internalization of higher education across the globe, many students move across the world and from state to state within the country in search of quality higher education. Many students across the country are now enrolled in various educational, social and professional growth in specialized fields. Like other states of India, Mizoram has also witnessed a rapid expansion of HEIs in the past few decades. A number of HEIs are established in different districts and other localities of the capital city, Aizawl. Most students experience the transition from school to colleges and higher education as challenging. Among the many challenges includes making new friends, increasing workload, adapting to the new academic culture, and pressure and high family expectations. Transitioning to a higher institution alone can be stressful enough for many students whose future careers are at stake. In addition, the pressure of moving to a new

place can bring more stress to students for their daily functioning. With the increase in the number of international and non-resident students, so is the acculturative stress.

Acculturation is a social, psychological, and cultural change that arises from balancing two cultures when moving to a new culture and society. Acculturative stress arises from intercultural contact that is brought on by post-immigration factors such as difficulties assimilating to the beliefs, values, and norms of a dominant culture and the frustration of limitations imposed by language barriers (Berry, 1997). It involves changes in food, language, culture, religious practices in a unique geographical location.

Multitude challenges may tend to rise in the process of adapting and adjusting to the new geographical area. Although studying in a new place may be an exciting transition for students, cultural differences may elevate

psychological distress to a certain extent. Among such is the feeling of isolation and homesickness. Students may have problems about feeling alone and relationships by moving to a new place with no friends, families, and familiarity with the place. Because of personality and individual differences, while some can easily make friends, some may have problems creating new relationships, leading to discomfort and isolation in the fresh set-up. Homesickness is a familiar feeling for students studying away from home. Still, when it hinders the process of adjustment and adaptation for an extended period, it becomes a concern for the educational and personal growth of the student.

Another major issue that increases acculturative stress is the language barrier. It is evident from various researches that the language barrier is one of the significant stressors contributing to acculturative stress. Friday (2018), in a study among international graduate students, has also revealed that the contributing factors to acculturation stress include the language barrier. The primary importance of language proficiency is considered to be the communicative purpose. It is crucial in acculturation as communicating effectively is paramount for a person to perform socially and academically in a new environment adequately. Language difficulty can affect students in many ways. It may hinder the adaptation process due to the inability to truly express themselves due to the lack of knowledge of the local language. Students may find it difficult to interact with the locals and form social groups and friendships. The inability to develop friendships with fellow students and professors may create learning challenges inside the classroom. Many students may feel intimidated to participate in classroom discussions and may have difficulty understanding lectures. This may be positively related to low academic achievement. A study has also found that language proficiency is positively correlated with freshmen's academic performance (Stoynoff, 1997). Over time, these issues often lead to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. It can be said that English proficiency affects international and non-resident students academically and contributes to their social, cultural, and personal adjustment.

Other sources of acculturative stress include food preference, cultural values and

perceived discrimination. Adapting to new dietary behaviour can be challenging to students when they move to a new place. Of the many other stresses resulting from acculturation, making changes to eating patterns and food items is found to be one of the challenges to overcome. Many of our values are rooted in our families and the culture of where we are born and raised. Moving to a new place involves living in a new culture and adapting to a new culture that students are not used to. Students who wish to maintain their traditional cultural lifestyle may have adjustment issues. Students who have difficulty balancing different cultures are more likely to experience adjustment difficulties and a high level of acculturative stress. A study has also found that difficulty with the dominant language and limited affiliation with new culture and customs may lead to academic, psychological, and social challenges (Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). On arrival to a new place, students have to face many challenges, including perceived discrimination. The most studied types of racial discrimination on immigrants and international students have been based on race and ethnicity. It has been found that experiences of daily racial discrimination and major racist events were significant predictors of acculturative stress (Dawson & Panchanandeswaran, 2010) and are associated with more significant psychological distress (Chung & Epstein, 2014). The perception of being a target of discrimination (isolation and unfair treatment) has been adversely related to physical and mental health, leading to a high level of acculturative stress (Cormack et al., 2018).

Despite all the adaptation issues and acculturative stress, it is essential to note that these stressful life situations can lead to positive changes and outcomes. With guidance on healthy coping skills from institutions and professionals, students can develop positive emotions cultural awareness, foster social relationships, and even thrive for stress-related growth. This study is necessary to identify the primary sources of acculturative stress and attempts to advocate providing assistance and guidance to non-resident students attending the university from across the country.

Objectives of the study

- To find out the primary sources of acculturative stress among non-

resident students pursuing higher education in Mizoram.

- To determine the level of acculturative stress among non-resident students pursuing higher education in Mizoram.
- To find differences in acculturative stress among non-resident students pursuing higher education concerning gender.

Hypothesis of the study

There is no significant difference between males and females on acculturative stress among non-resident students pursuing higher education.

Methodology

A survey method was employed in this study. The non-resident students of different HEIs of Mizoram are the study population. This study is limited to Mizoram University only. The sample consisted of 51 non-resident students (31 male, 20 female) of Mizoram University. The respondents included non-resident students with six undergraduates, 27 postgraduates, five M. Phil, 12 Ph. D and one Post-Doctoral Fellow of Mizoram University. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 39 years, with a mean of 25.4 ($SD=4.35$). The participants are from 13 states across the country.

A self-developed “Acculturative Stress Scale for Non-Resident Students in Higher Education Institutions in Mizoram” was used as the research tool. The tool consists of 34 items measuring six dimensions viz. Homesickness, Food Preferences, Social Behavior and Language, Cultural Values, Prejudice and Racial Discrimination, and Isolation.

In order to measure the internal consistency of the scale, Cronbach coefficient alpha and Split-half Spearman-Brown Coefficient were employed. The reliability for Cronbach alpha was found to be 0.87. By splitting into odd-even items, Spearman-Brown Coefficient was also computed and is found to be 0.90, both indicating high reliability of the scale.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Study

Objective 1: Major source of Acculturative Stress among Non-Resident Students Pursuing Higher Education in Mizoram

Students may face a multitude of stressors in the process of trying to adapt to the changes in daily living, language, food, transportation, purchasing groceries and clothing items, inability to make new friends and may even lead to the feeling of isolation and homesickness. Further, the majority of students in this study indicated the issue of the ‘language barrier’ in the new set-up. The issue of language has always been a concern for international students globally and for non-resident students across the country as well. It can be said that a lack of language in a new place can impede the process of adjustment and adaptation in many areas of daily functioning. Recent studies have also found that language is undoubtedly a barrier in international students’ acculturation process, either social or academic (Shan et al., 2020). A low English proficiency predicted homesickness and acculturative stress among international students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Lack of language proficiency can hinder interaction with the locals, purchasing items, and getting transportation which are the basic needs for the non-resident students. It can also have an impact on how students communicate with the other students as well as the professors during lectures. This issue can significantly correlate with acculturative stress and/or academic performance. As language barriers cause difficulty in relationships with peers and teachers, it is considered to be the critical factor deterring academic, psychological as well as socio-cultural adaptation and impeding the adjustment process of learning in the new educational setting. It is assumed that the language barrier has a considerable impact on students’ communication with locals and peers. The intimidation to form friendship and participation in classroom discussion results in a lack of social interaction. Studies have also found that lack of language proficiency and social interactions are significant sources of acculturative stress (Lee, 2008; Nasirudeen et al., 2014). It has also been found that students’ comfort level in using the English language significantly predicted acculturative stress (Zhang & Jung, 2017).

This study finding indicated that the language barrier has the most significant effect on acculturative stress. Other studies discussed above have also found that language

proficiency is the primary source of acculturative stress. In this study, it is essential to note that lack of English skills and lack of local language skills significantly increase the likelihood of high acculturative stress. This pointed out the need of the educational institutions and native peers in putting efforts to provide assistance and programs according to the needs of the non-resident students.

Objective 2: Level of Acculturative Stress among Non-Resident Students Pursuing Higher Education in Mizoram

One of the study's objectives is to determine the level of acculturative stress among non-resident students. The norms for interpretations and the level of non-resident students on the Acculturative Stress Scale are as follows.

Table 1: Norms and Students' Level of Acculturative Stress (N=51)

Range	Guideline	No. of students	%
145 - 170	Very High	0	0
100 - 145	High	10	19.61%
50 - 100	Mild	41	80.39%
Less than 50	Low	0	0
Total		51	

The above table categorized the level of acculturative stress scale into four groups, i.e., Very High, High, Mild and Low Acculturative Stress. The minimum possible score is 34, and the maximum possible score is 170.

After analyzing the total scores of the students, it has been found that there is no student in the "Very High" and "Low" categories. The majority of the students, i.e., 41 students, fall under the "Mild" category. Ten students are found to fall under the range of the "high" category of Acculturative Stress. The lowest score was found to be 54, and the highest score was found to be 130. Although there are no students under the "high" category, the finding revealed that significant acculturative stress does exist to a certain extent among the non-resident students when they move away from home to a new place. The finding has been supported by a previous study done on graduate students, which indicated that students showed acculturative stress in their graduate programs (Stewart et al., 2014). Several factors have been identified that causes stress due to cross-cultural experiences. The factors include homesickness, isolation, language competency, food habits, social and cultural beliefs and values, perceived prejudice and racial discrimination, geographic origin, and social connectedness.

Further, acculturation experiences can vary from person to person in terms of the factors that impact them due to individual differences. Age can play an essential role in

the level of acculturative stress of the students. Prior study has found that younger students reported a higher level of stress and depression compared to older students. It has also been found that age, years of residence, and perceived discrimination predicted homesickness and acculturative stress among international students (Monica & Supriya, 2016; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). The duration of stay in the host place can also affect the level of acculturative stress of the students. It is assumed that the longer the duration of stay, the more the experiences and aids in better adaptation and adjustment in the new place. A study has also indicated that students with a short length of stay reported higher acculturative stress and poor health (Ayoob & Singh, 2011). The prior finding has also demonstrated that female students were significantly more depressed and anxious than male students in the process of acculturation (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Rosenthal et al., 2008).

Any stress may be considered necessary and inevitable to motivate and challenge one to perform better in life. But when the stress becomes excessive, it can disrupt the students' functioning, either or both physically and mentally. It can also harm the students' academic achievement, relationships with friends and teachers as well as personal development. Attending higher education alone can be demanding with a rigorous workload with the pressure and responsibilities to achieve

a desirable academic outcome. Further, the added pressure in trying to adjust to new cultural norms at a new place can be challenging. Identifying the different stressors resulting from acculturation is of paramount importance for students themselves, institutions and professionals to provide appropriate help and guidance to minimize and overcome the stress for students' optimal functioning.

Objective 3: Gender Differences on Acculturative Stress among Non-Resident Students Pursuing Higher Education

Another objective of the study is to find if there is a difference in male and female non-resident students in the scores of Acculturative Stress. To compare the difference among male and female non-resident students, a t-test was employed.

Table: Descriptive statistics with t-test of Male and Female on the scores of Acculturative Stress

	N	Mean	SD	t-value	t-tabulated value	Interpretation
Male	31	87.03	2.91	0.01	2.01	No significant difference
Female	20	87.1	3.58			

The table above shows the mean, standard deviation, and t-value. The mean is found to be 87.03 for males and 87.1 for females. The standard deviation is found to be 2.91 and 3.58 for male and female students, respectively. The t-value is found to be 0.01 at 0.05 level with t-tabulated value of 2.01. This indicates that we can accept the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between males and females on their scores of Acculturative Stress. The finding is supported by several other pieces of research, which also found that there is no difference in the level of acculturative stress concerning gender among international undergraduate and graduate students (Desa et al., 2011; Azizah et al., 2014; Jean-Paul, 2015).

Meanwhile, although no significant differences are found, it is necessary to examine the differences in gender as prior studies have revealed that several acculturative stress variables affect females more than their male counterparts. It cannot be denied that gender stereotypes are strong as gender is much emphasized in some cultures. There are different expectations for males and females. Further, men and women tend to have different reactions to stress. They tend to perceive and try to manage stress in very different ways. Women are more likely to report a great deal of stress than males psychologically and biologically. This may be due to the differing hormones resulting in more emotions and more exposure to stress as they have to shoulder many roles in their day-to-day lives. And though women may cope better with stress in some ways, previous

researches have determined that women may be affected by stress to a greater degree, and are therefore more likely to experience anxiety or depression as a result of stress than men. Women also report higher stress levels overall than their male counterparts (Verma et. al, 2011).

Therefore, it cannot be denied that there is no difference among gender in the process of adjustment and adaptation in a new cultural environment. A study has found that although previous researches revealed that quantitative data analysis showed no difference among gender, qualitative analysis using interviews revealed that females tend to be more stressed than males in encountering acculturation (Thaker, 2013). Prior studies have also found the contradictory outcome that there is a significant difference in the level of acculturative stress in relation to gender. It has also been revealed that females experience more acculturative stress than males (Mehta & Beri, 2017).

Major Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are:

- 1) The majority of non-resident students, i.e., 41 students, fall on the "Mild" category. Ten students fall on the "High" category of Acculturative Stress. The major issue faced by non-resident students is reported to be the language barrier.

- 2) With the t-value of 0.01 at .05 level, it is found that there is no significant difference between male and female non-resident students pursuing higher education on the scores of Acculturative Stress.

Educational Implications

With the growth of higher education institutions in Mizoram, non-resident students also increase. The findings of the study revealed that acculturative stress does exist among non-resident students. This pointed out that educational institutions need to assist students in need. With the language barrier considered to be one of the significant issues students face, basic local language classes could help students learn the host language and aid in better communication with the locals within and outside the campus. Institutions can also help students expand their social network by organizing programs and activities that involve diverse students. This can help adjust to the new environment and adapt to the hosts' culture, thereby reducing the adverse effects of acculturative stress. The high level of acculturative stress scores among students advocated the need for institutions to provide counsellors or professionals for students in need. Counsellors and faculties play an essential role in helping students identify their cross-cultural issues and challenges. This way, healthy and effective social and coping skills can be inculcated to students and learn how these skills can be adapted to minimize their stress. Faculty members can help students adjust to the new academic norms by making the classroom an open and accepting environment and fostering a conducive environment that emphasizes opportunities for students' cross-cultural interaction.

Conclusion

After careful analysis of the findings, it may be concluded that 80.39% of the non-resident students' experienced 'mild' acculturative stress, and 19.61% of the non-resident students indicated 'high' acculturative stress. The primary issue faced in the process of acculturation is reported to be a language barrier. It has also been found that there is no significant difference between males and females on their scores of acculturative stress. This study pointed out the need for higher

education institutions to provide a welcoming and inclusive campus and professionals to cater to the needs of the non-resident students for ensuring a smooth transition to new institutions and balancing differing cultures in a new place.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the non-resident students of different higher education institutions of Mizoram.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Funding

The researchers did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References

- Ayoob, M. & Singh, T. (2011). Length of Stay, Acculturative Stress, and Health among Kashmiri Students in Central India. *Pakistan Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 11-15. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267409879_Length_of_Stay_Acculturative_Stress_and_Health_among_Kashmiri_Students_in_Central_India
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026999497378467>
- Chung, H. & Epstein, N. B. (2014). Perceived racial discrimination, acculturative stress, and psychological distress among Asian immigrants: The moderating effects of support and interpersonal strain from a partner. *International Journal of Intercultural*

- Relations*, 42, 129-139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.04.003>
- Cormack, D., Stanley, J., & Harris, R. (2018). Multiple forms of discrimination and relationships with health and wellbeing: Findings from national cross-sectional surveys in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Int. J. Equity Heal.*, 17, 1–15. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323244420_Multiple_forms_of_discrimination_and_relationships_with_health_and_wellbeing_Findings_from_national_cross-sectional_surveys_in_AotearoaNew_Zealand
- Dawson, B. A. & Panchanandeswaran, S. (2010). Discrimination and Acculturative Stress Among First-Generation Dominicans. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 30(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986310364750>
- Desa, A., Yusoooff, F. & Abd Kadir, N. B. (2011). Acculturative stress among international postgraduate students at UKM. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 59(2012), 364–369. Retrieved from www.sciencedirect.com. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.287
- Friday, N. (2018). A Study of Factors Contributing to Acculturation Stress for International Graduate Students in a Small Non-Profit Graduate School. Doctoral dissertation. Nova Southeastern University. Retrieved from NSUWorks, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. (164) https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_etd/164
- Jean-Paul, M. (2015). Acculturative stress and self-reported English Fluency in International Students in Ireland: A Quantitative Study. Retrieved from https://esource.dbs.ie/bitstream/handle/10788/2497/ba_jeanpaul_m_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Lee, J. (2008). Stress and Coping Experiences of International Students with Language Barriers During the Acculturation Process. Retrieved from https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/02/40/05/00001/lee_j.pdf
- Mallinckrodt, B., & Leong, F. T. L. (1992). International Graduate Students, Stress and Social Support. *Journal of College Student Development*, 33(1), 71-78.
- Mehta, A. & Beri, N. (2017). Acculturative Stress among International Students in Relation to Gender, Age and Family Income. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(37). <https://doi.org/10.21922/srjis.v4i37.10529>
- Monica, B. S & Supriya, V. M. (2016). Acculturative stress: Effect on academic performance of rural migrant students. *International Journal of Business Excellence*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.101504/IJBEX.2016.077620>.
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137-144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x>
- Nasirudeen, A.M.A., Koh, W.N.J., Lau, L.C.A., Seng, L.L., & How, A. L. (2014). Acculturative Stress among Asian International Students in Singapore. *Journal of International Students*, 4(4), 363-373.
- Pedersen, P. B. (1991). Counseling international students. *Counseling Psychologist*, 19(1), 10-58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000091191002>
- Poyrazli, S. & Lopez, M. D. (2007). An Exploratory Study of Perceived Discrimination and Homesickness: A Comparison of International Students and American Students. *The Journal of Psychology Interdisciplinary and Applied* 141(3), 263-280. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.141.3.263-280>
- Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, J., & Thomson, G. (2008). The health and wellbeing of international students at an Australian university. *Higher Education*, 55(1), 51-67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9037-1>
- Stewart, T. A., Owens, D., Queener, J. E., & Reynolds, C. A. (2014). The Relationship between Racial Identity and Acculturative Stress among African American Students in Counselor Training Programs. *Michigan Journal of Counseling*, 41(1), 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.22237/mijoc/1393632060>
- Shan, C., Hussain, M., & Sargani, C. R. (2020). A mix-method investigation on acculturative stress among Pakistani students in China. *PLoS ONE* 15(10): e0240103. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240103>
- Stoyhoff, S. (1997). Factors associated with international students' academic achievement. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 24(1), 56-69.
- Thaker, R. V. (2013). Acculturative Stress and Coping Strategies Used by Asian Indians Living in the United States: A Quantitative and Qualitative Inquiry. *Dissertations*. 548.

Retrieved from
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/548

Verma, R., Balhara, Y. P. S., & Gupta, C. S. (2011). Gender differences in stress response: Role of developmental and biological determinants. *Ind Psychiatry J*, 20(1), 4–10.
<https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.98407>

Zhang, Y., & Jung, E. (2017). Multi-Dimensionality of Acculturative Stress Among Chinese International Students: What Lies Behind Their Struggles? *International Research and Review: Journal of Phi Beta. Delta Honor Society for International Scholars* 7(1).