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# International Students of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences: A Survey about Their Needs and Difficulties

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** International students experience difficult situations in a foreign country that may intensify other problems, which are expected in these situations and may have harmful effects on the potential function of students. As the main problems of international students may vary in different situations, the aim of this study was to investigate the main problems of international students in Iran. **Methods:** In this cross sectional survey, all international students in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences who were in Iran during 2006-2007 were evaluated by a questionnaire consisting of six scoops of educational, psychological, supporting-communication, familial, economical and sociocultural. **Results:** Problems referred to sociocultural scope had greater mean (2.44) followed by communication problems (2.30) and economical problems (2.16). **Conclusion:** We suggest that consulting centers should employ experts familiar with international students problems capable of communicating well with international students.

**Key words:** Isfahan university, students, needs and difficulties.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher educational organizations are the main administrators of developing the boundaries of science; they achieve this goal by absorbing and training excellent scientists from inside and outside the country. This process of absorbing talented students is of great benefit for university organizations of a country. This may lead to information exchange, knowledge / culture transfer and economical benefits (1). This is the main cause of competition among American, European and also Asian universities in increasing the number of their international students (2, 3). The next challenge would be in the quality of educational courses and having qualified graduate students who can give benefit to the country of origin. For this reason, universities will invest capital to overcome problems and difficulties which are related to international students (2) who may face communication problems or misunderstand their role since entering a foreign country, even after a long period of time (4).

Culture shock is a term used to describe the anxiety and feelings of disorientation felt when students have to operate within an entirely different cultural or social environment in a foreign country (5). The pressure of different expectation of new culture, educational environments, society, depression, lack of fun or amusement, lack of rest and economical concerns may worsen their situation (6). So, international students are under many hardships and difficulties that they have to overcome them.

From another point of view, defining the difficulties and problems of international students may lead to more satisfaction and improving their educational status, which is one of the main missions of universities.

There are few studies in this field. One study handled by Otto Klineberg and colleagues was done on international students from eleven countries focusing on students' problems like language; their findings showed that different cultures, different styles of learning and education are the most prominent problems of students (7).

In another study conducted on Iranian students of PhD degree in Australian universities in 1995, the most important problems reported as speaking in another language, cultural problems and social deprivation (8). Also, language and cultural difficulties both in and out of the classroom and difficult access to textbooks were the most serious problems of the international students in American colleges and universities (9). In more recent studies, financial concerns, lack of health insurance, difficulties adjusting to new cultural norms and homesickness, cultural misunderstanding, lack of community inclusion, perceived discrimination, and language issues are the main problems faced by international students (10, 11, 12).

As the main problems of international students may vary in different situations and regarding to the importance of these issues on the educational performance of the students, the aim

of this study was to find out the main problems of international students in Iran.

### Methods

This study was a cross sectional survey done on all international students in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences who were in Iran during 2006-2007.

We excluded all students who were immigrants to Iran, or were transferred transiently to Iran. Students filled out the questionnaire, which was prepared by an expert with Master of Science (M. Sc.) in psychology. We took informed consent from all participants and we set up a proper time and place for the interview with students. The interview lasted for 45 minutes for each participant personally and the questionnaire was filled out during the session.

We evaluated six domains consisting of educational, psychological, supporting communication, familial, economical and sociocultural status of participants.

Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  equal to 0.93 for the whole questionnaire was achieved. Content validity was confirmed by expert professors of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences who were familiar with the subject. Data were analyzed by SPSS for Windows, version 16.

## 2. RESULTS

Demographic data of participants were as follows:

- Among all 50 participants, 90 percent of students were Asian and 10 percent were non-Asian, 88 percent were single and 12 percent were married.
- The mean age of participants was 24 years and the majority of students were at the sixth semester of their study period. Mean of their average score was 13.84.
- Among all, 96 percent were in dormitories of university and 4 percent had their own personal residence. Also, 40 percent of participants were conditioned once during their study period.
- The most important problems of students regarding their educational status were as follows:
- Among all, 64 percent of students expressed dissatisfaction about the large amount of curriculum materials, 52 percent suffered from lack of concentration during study time, 52 percent had problems and delay in writing the lecture note.

### Psychological:

- Anxiety (58 percent), depression (58 percent), Flatness (46 percent)

### Supporting-communication

- Lack of emotional support from Iranians (56 percent)
- Difficulties in communication with Iranians (54 percent)
- Difficulties in trusting Iranians (54 percent)

### Familial problems:

- Seventy two percent complained of homesickness; 32 percent reported that their families have difficulties in traveling to Iran, and 32 percent reported that it is difficult for them to travel to their own country.

### Economic:

- Higher financing costs in Iran (38 percent)
- Future economical problems (58 percent)
- Not having adequate personal financial resources (54 percent)

### Sociocultural:

Sixty-six percent had problems with difference in cultures; 62 percent reported that Iranian would not put value on foreign traditions and 58 percent had difficulties in understanding Iranian traditions and values (58 percent).

Title	Mean	SD
Educational problems	1.98	0.78
Psychological problems	2.13	1.08
Communication problems	2.30	1.51
Familial problems	1.35	0.91
Economical problems	2.16	0.81
Socio-Cultural problems	2.44	0.86
Overall	2.06	0.69

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of different problems reported by students

According to Table 1, problems referred to sociocultural scope had greater mean (2.44) followed by communication problems (2.30) and economical problems (2.16).

## 3. DISCUSSION

In this study we evaluated difficulties and problems of international students in six scopes of educational, psychological, supporting-communication, familial, economical and sociocultural. We found that the most important problems of students are focused in sociocultural and supporting-communication scopes.

These results support the findings of many studies in other parts of the world (7, 10, 12, 13). The most important cultural problem of students refers to the different cultures of the origin and host countries. The attitudes of students are compatible with their own culture and when they face a new circumstance they experience a new cultural atmosphere that they cannot cope with especially during the first months of exposure (5). So they set up small groups within themselves and do not extend their communication with the students of the target country. This limitation will bring them a feeling of insecurity and dissatisfaction and this may lead to prominent communication and supporting problems (11, 14).

Economical problems would be the next important problem. Living in a foreign country will impose higher costs on students and sometimes they face unexpected costs that make the situation more difficult for them (15). These students cannot achieve a good job position and they do not have a reliable financial resource for urgent situations, and this may cause increased anxiety in these students (10, 16).

These problems would have harmful effects on students' lives; if they are not managed in a proper way, these might cause loneliness, anxiety and depression. Additionally, the chronicity of these situations may affect quality of life as well as the educational and professional functions of students. Educational problems somehow are inevitable, regarding difficulties in understanding foreign language, difficult comprehension, hardships in writing lecture notes, and answering questions (11).

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, international students experience difficult situations in a foreign country that may intensify other problems, which are expected in these situations and may have harmful effects on the potential function of students (17).

In this regard we suggest consulting centers to employ experts

who are familiar with such problems and able to well communicate with international students.

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