

Adaptation challenges of international students at the university of Ghana

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Abstract

Globally, the number of international students rose from approximately 2.1 million in 2000 to nearly 6.9 million in 2022. Ghana is home to about 5,416 international students, but they are rarely the focus of research. A few studies that have been done about international students in Ghana were mainly quantitative and mixed methods, which considered communication among students in a multi-cultural learning environment and health-seeking behaviours for malaria treatment. There are not enough studies conducted to understand the adaptation challenges from the international students' point of view. This study explores the adaptation challenges of international students at the University of Ghana. A qualitative approach was adopted, and twenty-five (25) international students at the University of Ghana were recruited through a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants based on their qualities and criteria determined by the research purpose. The data was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews and subsequently analyzed using the seven-step framework analysis. Four (4) themes emerged under this study: 1) language barrier, 2) challenge navigating the environment, 3) financial problems 4) unmet institutional support needs. This study concludes that international students face challenges adjusting to university life in a foreign country, regardless of their country of origin. There is, therefore, a need to provide adequate support for them to adapt successfully to university life.

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Introduction

International education has become an integral part of higher education worldwide, shaping students' perspectives, skills, and global outlook (Jianvittayakit, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2023). The phenomenon of studying in a country other than one's own—whether for a short-term exchange or a full degree programme—has steadily increased since the mid-twentieth century and shows no signs of declining (Gyasi-Gyamerah, 2017; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2025).

Globally, the number of international students rose from approximately 2.1 million in 2000 to nearly 6.9 million in 2022 (UNESCO, 2025). The United States alone hosted 1,177,766 international students in the 2024/2025 academic year, representing about 6% of the total U.S. higher education population (IIE, 2025). Growth is particularly notable in Asian countries, which now host more than half of the world's international students, while Europe hosts roughly 23% and Africa about 12% (UNESCO, 2025).

Africa is not exempt from this trend. African universities regularly admit hundreds of international students annually, and the number is expected to increase in the coming decades (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2017). In Ghana, for example, public universities enrolled 2,018 international students in the 2016/2017 academic year (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2018). The University of Ghana aims to increase international student enrolment to 10% of its total student population through strategies such as targeted advertising and exchange programmes (Gyasi-Gyamerah, 2017). These trends underscore the growing demand for international education worldwide and highlight the importance of understanding the experiences and challenges of students pursuing studies abroad.

International students face a range of academic, social, and cultural challenges when studying abroad. Research indicates that language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, and discrimination can negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Brown & Holloway, 2022; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These challenges often require students to develop coping strategies and seek support from both formal and informal sources. The majority of studies on international student adaptation have been conducted in Western contexts, particularly in North America, Europe, and Australia (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These studies suggest that successful adaptation depends on factors such as social support, resilience, and familiarity with the host culture. For instance, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2020) emphasize that cultural adjustment is a dynamic process shaped by interactions between the student and their environment, aligning with the principles of Cross – Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001).

Within the African contexts, however, research on international student experiences is limited. Students in Ghana indicate that international students face unique challenges, including navigating unfamiliar academic systems and financial constraints, as well as adapting to local culture (Gyasi-Gyamerah, 2017; International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2017). Public universities in Ghana are increasingly admitting

international students, yet there is a need for institutional strategies that support their academic and social integration (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2018).

Existing literature underscores the importance of both formal support mechanisms, such as university programs and counseling services, and informal support networks, such as friendships and family connections, in facilitating students' adjustment (Kim, 2002; Young, 1988). By examining these factors in the Ghanaian context, the present study seeks to fill a gap in the literature and provide insights into how international students can be better supported during their adaptation process.

Statement of the problem

Adapting to a new culture and educational system can be challenging and stressful for international students (Ward et al., 2020; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Despite the increasing number of international students worldwide, research indicates that many face difficulties, including language barriers, social isolation, homesickness, cultural differences, and discrimination, which can impede their academic success and overall well-being (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Brown & Holloway, 2022). While several studies have explored international student adaptation in Western countries (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), there is limited research that has focused on African contexts. Understanding how international students navigate cultural and academic challenges in Ghana is crucial, given the growing diversity of the student population and the country's strategic efforts to internationalize higher education. Therefore, this study aims to explore the adaptation challenges faced by international students in Ghana, using a qualitative approach. By identifying these challenges, the study seeks to inform institutional policies and support services to enhance the academic and social experiences of international students.

Theoretical perspective

This study is guided by the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Young, 1988; Kim, 2001), which provides a framework for understanding the experiences of individuals adjusting to new cultural environments. Kim (2001) describes cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic process in which individuals strive to achieve internal balance while navigating challenging environmental conditions. The theory assumes that humans possess an inherent drive to adapt, and that adaptation occurs through interaction with and support from the surrounding environment. The theory distinguishes between two types of support: formal support, provided by institutions and governments, and informal support, offered by family, friends, acquaintances, or peers, either in the host or home country (Kim, 2001). Adaptation is understood as a complex, dynamic, and often challenging process, influenced by both individual characteristics—such as openness, resilience, and positivity—and the host environment's responsiveness (Young, 1988; Kim, 2001).

Applying this theory to the current study, it provides a lens for examining the challenges faced by international students in Ghanaian universities. These challenges include academic stress, financial difficulties, language barriers, social isolation, and cultural differences. The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory helps explain how international students seek and utilize formal and informal support systems to navigate these challenges, achieve personal equilibrium, and successfully adapt to the host environment. Using this theoretical framework, the researcher can systematically explore the adaptation needs of international students and the role of institutional and social support in facilitating their adjustment.

Methods

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is suitable for exploring and understanding the meaning international students ascribe to the challenges of studying abroad (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A phenomenological research design was employed to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, enabling the identification of adaptation problems among international students (McMillan et al., 2010). The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture rich, detailed descriptions of participants' perspectives, which are critical for understanding complex social and cultural phenomena.

Research setting

The study was conducted at the University of Ghana, located in the Greater Accra Region. Compared to other universities in Ghana, the University of Ghana attracts the largest and most diverse group of international students from across Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia ((University of Ghana Basic Statistics, 2012). International students enroll in a variety of programmes, including certificates, diplomas, undergraduate, and postgraduate degrees, while some participate as visiting students for a semester or year. The University of Ghana offers a wide range of courses, from African Studies to Business Administration, Education, Humanities, Health Sciences, and Basic and Applied Sciences, providing international students with opportunities for academic growth and cultural engagement. The university also promotes cultural and religious diversity and is pursuing an aggressive internationalization agenda, aiming to have 10% of its student body made up of international students. During the 2011–2012 academic year, the university had 38,562 students, with 1,122 (approximately 3%) international students (University of Ghana Basic Statistics, 2012), and by July 2020, 903 international students were enrolled (University of Ghana, 2020).

Participants and participants selection

A total of 25 international students (14 males and 11 females) participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study, such as being international students currently enrolled at the University of Ghana (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Snowball sampling, a subset of purposive sampling, was employed to recruit additional participants through referrals from initial participants (Noy, 2008). Participants selected met the following inclusion criteria: 1) were international students officially recognized by the University of Ghana, 2) had been enrolled at the university for at least one semester, were 18 years of age or older, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide written in English. In-depth interviews were chosen for their flexibility, interactivity, and ability to probe participants to explore meanings attached to their experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Audio files were saved on a password-protected computer to prevent unauthorized access

Data collection procedure

Data collection commenced after the researcher obtained an introductory letter from the Department of Social Work, which facilitates access to the International Programs Office and introduction to potential participants. The purpose of the study and participants' roles were clearly explained, and individuals who expressed interest were contacted to arrange convenient times and location for the interviews. Data were collected at the international programs office and International Hostel through in –depth interviews using semi-structured interview guide written in English, with each interview lasting between forty (40) and fifty (50) minutes. In- depth interviews were chosen for their flexibility, interactivity, and ability to probe participants to explore meanings attached to their experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). The interviews gathered information on participants' sociodemographic characteristics, motivating factors, ways international students adapt, and support systems available to international students. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Audio files were saved on a password-protected computer to prevent unauthorized access.

Ethical considerations

All ethical protocols governing social work research were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities of the University of Ghana (ECH 278 / 21 -22). Participants were provided with clear and detailed information about the purpose of the study, their expected role, and any

potential risks or benefits, after which informed consent was obtained. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to refuse participation or withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by replacing personal identifiers with pseudonyms and removing any potentially identifying information from the transcripts. Data were handled in accordance with ethical data protection guidelines, stored securely on a password-protected device, and accessible only to the researcher. To minimize any psychological or emotional discomfort, participants were allowed to skip questions they felt uncomfortable answering, and the researcher maintained a respectful and non-judgmental approach during interviews. Respect for participants were upheld, and the researcher constantly reflected on her own positionality and potential influence on the research process to ensure ethical integrity.

Data Management and Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized using unique codes and pseudonyms. Data were stored securely on a password protected computer with email backup, with access restricted to the researcher. Transcripts were systematically coded for thematic analysis, following ethical guidelines, all data will be permanently deleted after study completion to maintain confidentiality.

The study employed the framework method by Gale et al. (2013) to analyse the qualitative data, following a systematic seven-stage process. Stage 1: Transcription – All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into text. Stage 2: Familiarization – The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a thorough understanding of the content, language, and ideas expressed by participants. Stage 3: Coding – Each transcript was read line by line, and codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text that captured key ideas. Stage 4: Developing a Working Analytical Framework – Based on the study objectives and relevant literature, a working analytical framework was developed to organize and group related codes. Stage 5: Applying the Analytical Framework – Subsequent transcripts were indexed using the established codes and categories, ensuring consistency across the data. Stage 6: Charting Data into the Framework Matrix – Data were summarized and arranged into a matrix, where columns represented initial themes or subthemes and rows represented individual transcripts. This allowed for systematic comparison and visualization of patterns across participants. Stage 7: Interpreting the Data – Finally, the researcher reviewed the charted data to generate overarching themes and subthemes, providing a detailed and meaningful interpretation grounded in participants' perspectives. Throughout the process, reflexivity and iterative review were employed to enhance the credibility and transparency of the analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study applied credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement during in-depth interviews, member checking by summarizing responses for accuracy, and peer debriefing with the supervisor and colleagues to refine codes and reduce bias. Dependability was ensured via a transparent audit trail of methodological decisions, detailed field notes, memo writing, and the systematic use of Gale et al.'s (2013) Framework Analysis. Transferability was supported with thick descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, sampling, and data collection context to aid comparison with similar populations. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding findings in participants' narratives using reflexive notes, verbatim quotations, and a password-protected audit trail of raw data and analytic decisions, with audio recordings and verbatim transcription ensuring interpretations reflected authentic voices.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the data: language barrier, challenge navigating the environment, financial problems, and unmet institutional support needs. In line with the study's research objectives, each theme is presented to address specific aspects of international students' adaptation experiences at the University of Ghana.

Theme 1: Language Barrier

The study found that language barrier was one of the major challenges international students encountered at the University of Ghana. Students described how both the use of local languages and the Ghanaian accent affected their academic and social integration.

Some students shared their difficulties in understanding lectures due to the frequent switching between English and Twi:

"The first thing that always gave me problem was language... even in classes the lecturers always speak Twi... everyone is laughing and I am like why are they laughing..." (RUIS 1, 21 years, Female, Nigeria)

Others recounted how the language barrier affected group work, friendships, and participation:

"Language also affected how I made friends... I asked them to speak English because we are all not Ghanaians..." (RUIS 1, 21 years, Male, Burkina Faso)

Students also experienced challenges with accents and local expressions:

"The accent of the people... I struggle to understand the people sometimes." (EGIS 5, 25 years, Male, Germany)

These findings demonstrate that language played a significant role in shaping students' academic, social, and psychological adaptation.

Theme 2: Challenge navigating the environment

International students highlighted difficulties in finding their way around campus and the surrounding community. Not knowing the road network, incorrect directions from others, and difficulty guiding taxi drivers were common issues:

"I had challenge navigating the environment... always directed to the wrong place..." (RUIS 1, 21 years, Female, U.S)

"Even if you know somewhere, how to direct the person is also a challenge." (RUIS 16, 22 years, Male, Benin)

These challenges affected their mobility, sense of independence, and general comfort within the university environment.

Theme 3: Financial problems

Financial difficulties were a major challenge. Students noted that the Ghanaian currency was more expensive when converted from their home currencies:

"When I first came, I was always converting everything to naira... it is much more expensive." (RUIS 2, 19 years, Female, Nigeria)

Students also faced delays in receiving scholarship stipends:

"The stipend takes quite a long time... two to three months... you must keep borrowing." (RGIS 7, 34 years, Male, Kenya)

Others experienced exploitation and overcharging at markets and by service providers:

"The moment they realised I am not from Ghana, the price shoots up..." (RGIS 7, 34 years, Male, Kenya)

These financial challenges affected students' ability to cope effectively and maintain a stable standard of living.

Theme 4: Unmet institutional support needs

Students expressed that although the International Programmes Office (IPO) offered some services, their expectations were not met. They cited inadequate care, lack of follow-up, and poor communication—especially during crises such as COVID-19:

"We just expect more from the IPO... we were left alone... nobody was checking on us... we were depressed." (RUIS 25, 21 years, Female, Congo Brazzaville)

Others were dissatisfied with residential facilities and the quality of services relative to cost:

“I pay almost \$2,000... the services for the hostel is not truly equivalent to what you get...” (RGIS 8, 31 years, Female, Uganda)

Students also struggled with access to clear information:

“I didn’t get the essential information that I needed... I spent my day running through the campus...” (EGIS 3, 25 years, Female, Germany)

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that international students at the University of Ghana experience multiple challenges during their adaptation process, including language barriers, difficulties navigating the physical and social environment, unmet institutional support needs, and financial constraints. These challenges collectively shaped their academic, social, and psychological adjustment. Consistent with the cross-cultural adaptation theory, the students’ experiences illustrate that adaptation is a dynamic, continuous, and often stressful process shaped by both individual agency and host-environment conditions.

Language barrier

Language barriers emerged as one of the most significant challenges affecting students’ academic engagement, classroom participation, and social integration. Many participants reported that lecturers occasionally used the local language, Twi, despite the presence of international students. This limited their comprehension, contributed to feelings of exclusion, and discouraged class participation. While previous studies such as Morri (2000), have noted the influence of language on academic performance, more recent research confirms the centrality of language to international student adaptation. For instance, Zhang and Goodson (2011) and Heng (2018) found that language barriers limit academic confidence, inhibit social interaction, and contribute to feelings of marginalization in host institutions.

The narratives in this study demonstrate that communication difficulties were not only about linguistic competence but also about accent, speed of speech, and the mixing of local dialects with English, which aligns with O’Reilly et al. (2010) who found that even fluent English speakers experience communication challenges when exposed to unfamiliar accents or hybrid language forms.

Importantly, the findings suggest that language barriers constrained the formation of friendships, especially for Francophone students and those who struggled with English. Their peers were often unwilling to provide linguistic assistance, leading to social isolation. In this sense, the findings contribute to the co-construction of new knowledge:

language difficulties operate not only as an academic barrier but also as a relational and emotional barrier that shapes belonging, identity negotiation, and peer integration.

Through the lens of the cross-cultural adaptation theory, communication competence is foundational to successful adaptation. Limited understanding of the dominant linguistic codes of the host environment reduces students' ability to engage actively, thereby slowing the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic.

Challenges navigating the environment

Another challenge identified was the difficulty of navigating the university environment. Despite receiving campus tours, students still struggled to locate buildings, departments, and services. This lack of environmental familiarity resulted in confusion, delays, and, in some cases, financial exploitation by drivers who took advantage of their vulnerability.

This finding aligns with recent studies by Andrade (2020) and Glass & Westmont (2014), which show that unfamiliar institutional structures, transportation systems, and campus layouts heighten international students' stress levels. Interpreting these findings through an adaptive lens, the unfamiliarity of the physical environment acts as a stressor that activates the adaptation process described by the cross-cultural adaptation theory. Students' narratives show that adaptation is not merely psychological but also spatial, involving learning to navigate, interpret, and make sense of the physical and social terrain of the host context.

Unmet institutional support needs

The study also revealed significant dissatisfaction with institutional support, particularly from the International Programmes Office (IPO). Participants consistently described a lack of responsiveness, care, and follow-up, especially during urgent periods such as the COVID-19 lockdowns. Their experiences resonate with findings by Chowdhury & Phan (2021) and Lee & Rice (2007), which assert that institutional indifference or inadequate support structures intensify international students' vulnerability and stress.

The perceived lack of support contributes to emotional distress, homesickness, and feelings of abandonment. While infrastructure may exist, students' perception of support—shaped by staff responsiveness, communication, and empathy—plays a far more significant role in shaping their adaptation experiences. This reinforces the cross-cultural adaptation theory's emphasis on host receptivity, which suggests that the attitudes and behaviours of host institutions influence the rate and quality of adaptation. When international students perceive institutional neglect, the stress–adaptation–growth cycle can be slowed or disrupted.

The narratives co-construct knowledge by illustrating that support is not only structural (e.g., offices, staff) but also relational (e.g., respect, human interaction, emotional sensitivity). Students' repeated complaints about unfriendly or dismissive staff indicate that interpersonal dynamics are central to their sense of belonging and safety.

Financial challenges

Financial difficulties were also prominent, particularly due to currency conversion issues, delays in scholarship stipends, and unexpected expenses. Students from countries with weaker currencies felt economically strained, which aligns with contemporary studies such as Burge et al. (2020) and Caldera et al. (2022) that highlight financial stress as a major impediment to international student adjustment.

Participants' narratives reveal multiple layers of financial vulnerability, including delayed scholarship payments, the high cost of living in Ghana, COVID-19-related banking restrictions, and exploitation by vendors and taxi drivers who overcharged them because they were foreigners. The financial strain added psychological stress and limited their ability to participate in social or academic activities. Interpreting this through the cross-cultural adaptation theory, financial instability serves as a persistent stressor that complicates the adaptation cycle. Students expend cognitive and emotional energy managing financial insecurity, leaving fewer resources for academic engagement and cultural learning.

Implications of the study

The findings of the study revealed the adaptation challenges of international students, therefore to enhance their adaptation, the following implication for social work practice should be considered: Social workers should educate domestic students about the need to recognize the diverse set of skills international students contribute to the host institution whilst they broaden their intercultural competency and perspective which benefits their personal growth and future professional chances. Social workers should collaborate with the IPO, counsellors and psychologists in institutions to provide doorstep services to international students. This they can do by paying them visits and sending emails often to check on them and ask them to get in touch if they need assistance. Also, social workers should advocate for the development of a learning centre through a partnership between IPO and the language center to offer English language skills development to international students with low English Proficiency.

Recommendations

The University should strictly enforce English as the medium of instruction in classes with international students and train staff on inclusive teaching practices. Orientation should be extended with repeated campus navigation support and digital tools like interactive maps and QR signs. Institutional support should improve through periodic welfare check – ins, intercultural staff training, and a peer buddy program pairing international and Ghanaian students. Financial stress can be eased by faster stipend disbursement, tailored financial literacy sessions, and partnerships with local vendors to prevent exploitation. To build inclusion, the University should expand cross-cultural programs and create safe spaces where international students can connect, share concerns, and access support.

Limitations and directions for future studies

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample was drawn from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the results. The experiences and perspectives captured in this study may not fully represent those of all international students studying across universities in Ghana, where institutional policies, campus cultures, and support systems may vary. Also, all interviews were conducted in English. Although English is widely used in academic settings in Ghana, some participants with lower levels of English proficiency may have found it challenging to fully articulate their experiences and perspectives. This language constraint may have limited the depth or clarity of some responses. Future research should build on the findings of this study by adopting approaches that provide a more comprehensive understanding of international students' adaptation in Ghana. One important direction would be to conduct longitudinal studies that follow international students over an extended period. Such research could provide valuable insights into how students' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies evolve throughout their academic journey. Additionally, future studies could explore comparative analyses across multiple Ghanaian universities. Examining differences in institutional environments, policies, and support services would help identify how various universities facilitate or hinder the adaptation of international students. Furthermore, future studies may explore the role of social media and digital communication in shaping international students' adaptation experiences. Finally, researchers are encouraged to employ mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative research designs.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges international students face while adapting to life at the University of Ghana. The findings demonstrate that language barriers, difficulties navigating the environment, unmet institutional support needs, and financial constraints significantly shape their academic, social, and psychological adjustment. These challenges often reinforce one another, creating a cycle of stress that slows students' overall adaptation. Language barriers, including the mixing of English with local dialects and unfamiliar accents, affected students' classroom participation, comprehension, and ability to build meaningful friendships. Likewise, challenges navigating the physical environment resulted in confusion, stress, and financial exploitation, even after orientation activities. Unmet institutional support needs—particularly perceptions of limited communication, responsiveness, and emotional support from the International Programmes Office—heightened feelings of exclusion and vulnerability. Financial challenges, including currency conversion issues, delayed stipends, and high living costs, further compounded students' stress. Viewed through the lens of the cross-cultural adaptation theory, these findings illustrate that adaptation is not merely an individual process but one shaped by the host environment's linguistic practices, institutional

responsiveness, and socio-economic conditions. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting how the University of Ghana's cultural and structural context mediates the stress–adaptation–growth cycle for international students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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