

Challenges and Expectations of First Year International Medical Students in Egypt

تحديات وتوقعات الفرقة الأولى من طلاب الطب الوافدين في جامعة عين شمس في مصر

Prof. Nayera S. Mostafa¹

¹Professor in Department of Community, Environmental and Occupational Medicine, Advisor of international students, International relations office, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

Abstract

Background: International students encounter both good and bad stressors. Egypt's international student population is growing. **Objectives:** The purpose of this research is to identify the obstacles and expectations of a group of international students studying in Egypt. **Methods:** In 2020, three focus groups were held in English with twenty first-year international medical students. Each 60-minute talk was recorded and examined. Some of them communicated via e-mail to share their feelings about the changes caused by the pandemic. **Results:** International medical students were motivated to study in Egypt because of the good school system, steady study conditions, and availability of scholarships. They experienced difficulties such as difficult medical studies, language barriers, and cultural differences. Mentorship programs, Arabic language classes, and intercultural activities might be beneficial. **Conclusions:** Although international students are motivated by their educational experience in Egypt, they face a number of problems. During a catastrophe such as the global pandemic, extra social support is essential.

Keywords: Challenge; Expectation; Focus group discussion; International medical student.

المستخلص:

يواجه الطلاب الوافدون كلاً من التجارب الإيجابية والضغط السلبية. يتزايد عدد الطلاب الوافدين في مصر. **الأهداف:** الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد تحديات وتوقعات مجموعة من الطلاب الوافدين الذين يدرسون في مصر. **الطرق:** تم إجراء ثلاث مجموعات تركيز مع عشرين طالباً وافداً في السنة الأولى من كلية الطب في عام 2020. تم تسجيل وتحليل كل مناقشة مدتها 60 دقيقة. أعرب بعضهم عن أفكارهم حول التغييرات الناجمة عن الوباء من خلال رسائل البريد الإلكتروني. النتائج: تم تحفيز طلاب الطب الوافدين للدراسة في مصر بسبب النظام المدرسي الجيد وظروف الدراسة المستقرة وتوافر المنح الدراسية. كانت الدراسات الطبية الجادة والحاجز اللغوي والاختلاف بين الثقافات من بين التحديات التي واجهتهم. سيكون من المفيد توفير برنامج إرشادي ودورة في اللغة العربية وأنشطة متعددة الثقافات. **الاستنتاجات:** على الرغم من تحفيز الطلاب الوافدين برحلتهم التعليمية في مصر، إلا أنهم مثقلون بعدة تحديات. مطلوب دعم اجتماعي لهم أثناء الأزمة مثل الوباء العالمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحدي؛ توقع؛ مناقشة جماعية في موضوع محدد؛ طالب الطب الوافد.

Introduction

International education benefits both international and domestic students. It improves intercultural interaction by teaching students to accept differences in cultures and worldviews. International students demonstrate excellent qualifications for worldwide employment. Furthermore, internationalisation is a significant source of national and institutional income ^[1].

Governments promote internationalisation in higher education since it is a developing sector ^[2]. International students endure both positive and negative stressors ^[3-4]. Academic stresses, such as enrolment in a new educational system, or social stressors, such as the inability to obtain their favourite cuisine, are examples of stressors ^[4].

Language difficulties affect academic and social performance. Language may have an impact on their academic performance and studies. It makes it tough to make friends socially ^[5]. Academic language barriers exacerbate the gap between students' expectations and their actual performance in early examinations and assessments ^[4,6].

The language barrier is not the only challenge that overseas students face. Other problems mentioned in the literature include cultural barriers ^[7], homesickness ^[8], a lack of social support ^[9], and academic difficulties ^[10]. All of this leads to international students experiencing stress ^[11], a lower quality of life ^[12], and a lack of social support from acquaintances ^[13].

Abdelaziz et al., 2018 ^[14] examined various elements of medical education in Egypt, both past and present. Although international medical student enrolment is a growing concern in Egypt, no research have been conducted so far. The current study aims to identify the problems and expectations of overseas students, as well as how they thought and felt at the start of their medical educational journey at an Egyptian university. The current study sought the attitudes and perspectives of international students at the start of their

educational career. It was expected to identify several issues experienced by international students and to try to draw findings and recommendations that would improve the lives of international students. It could be a good idea to create a plan for supporting this specific group based on their requirements. It could be a good idea to create a plan for supporting this specific group based on their requirements.

Methods

Participants

International students apply online for Egyptian universities with a choice of major and universities in Egypt ^[15]. Because English is the primary study language, applicants should have a basic understanding of the language.

In 2019, Ain Shams Medical School received a considerable number of applications from overseas students for the first year. The current study focused on non-Arabic speaking students, who face additional hurdles due to linguistic and cultural differences.

There were 65 first-year non-Arabic speaking students. During the first semester of their first academic year, a sample of foreign African and Asian medical students were invited (through personal communication) to engage in group interviews on a voluntary basis. The researcher held focus groups until "saturation" of ideas was attained. Saturation is a strategy for arriving at thoughts that do not add to the theory ^[16].

This study included twenty international first-year medical students (10 females and 10 men), representing 30% of the target population. Thirteen students were from Asia, while seven were from Africa. (Table 1). The first group had eight students, and the second and third groups each had six students.

Group Interview Settings

A focus group is a discussion led by a researcher inside a small group on a certain topic. The moderator, a researcher, invites individuals to express their ideas and opinions

^[17]. The researcher takes on a 'investigative' role in group interviews, asking questions, encouraging participants to participate, and regulating the flow of group discussion. ^[18]. A focus group serves explanatory and exploratory goals ^[17], which is essential in the current study because the attitudes and thoughts of international students have not previously been adequately investigated in Egypt.

Setting and Timing of the Group Interviews

Group interviews were conducted in the current study during the first semester to capture students' expectations, opinions, challenges, and dreams at the start of their study years in Egypt. Furthermore, the researcher chose to allow them some time since their arrival in the country and an opportunity to become acquainted with both the study system and the researcher. During regular study days, the interviews took place in a meeting room at the medical school. Aside from their learning sessions, the researcher chose a leisure period in their timetable. The pupils were advised of the meeting's time and location by personal correspondence. Because they have diverse mother tongue languages and English is the official language of their study, the language used in the focus group was English.

The researcher moderated them. The interviews were attended by a note taker and recorded to assure the precision of the data collection process. At the start of the setting, the participants were asked for permission to record. Three group interviews were conducted, each lasting around 60 minutes. Six leading questions were asked in each of the three group interviews. Questions were derived from ideas arising from the literature ^[3-4] and modified based on the researcher's previous experience with other students. They were designed to investigate international students' perceptions towards their experience (Table 2).

During COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 epidemic, medical investigations in Egypt and many other nations were halted. The thoughts and concerns of non-native students living alone without their families, as well as their stopped education, form a significant subject for research.

The study suspension and restriction of any meetings as a result of the COVID-19 preventive measures interferes with setting up further group discussions to investigate the modifications in their plans. As a result, the researcher emailed the participants who had previously attended the focus group, asking them to convey their ideas, expectations, obstacles, or concerns about their education during the COVID-19 epidemic. Their responses were received for two weeks.

Data Analysis

The data was carefully analysed in accordance with the developing themes. The focus group discussions that were captured were compiled and coded. Some conversation quotes were utilised to back up the findings.

Results

General Information about the Participants

Only one of the twenty participants had previously lived in a nation other than her home country. Three students had previously attended other schools in other countries for a year. Seven pupils had previously been outside of their own nations for tourism purposes. One of them had previously visited Egypt as a child.

Domains and Themes

Domain A: Motivation for Studying Medicine Abroad Especially in Egypt

Theme A.1: Difficulty of Studying at the Country of Origin

This challenge stems primarily from economic and/or political issues. "Studying medicine has always been a dream of mine, but it is difficult to study medicine in my country due to political and financial issues."

Theme A.2: Quality of the Target School Program

The school's strong reputation and rating among other African universities enticed African students to enrol. "I've heard that Egyptian surgeons are experts in their field." "Some of my relatives have previously travelled to Egypt to receive medical treatment and have been successfully cured." "Egypt is very good at teaching medicine." It disseminates medical expertise to other countries."

Theme A.3: Availability of Scholarships and Financial Aids for Education

Some scholarships were available to students from their home nations or to government agencies in the host country. Students were motivated to apply to the institution as a result of this. Some were enrolled in schools in their own countries and withdrew to take advantage of this chance. "I passed the pre-requisite exam at my country's medical school, but I changed my mind when I received this scholarship."

Theme A.4: Study Conditions

Some students believe that studying in Egypt is inexpensive. Other colleges with comparable rankings are more expensive. "Some relatives went to this university and recommended it to me because of the good academics and reasonable price."

Theme A.5: Welcoming System and Community

In recent years, Egyptian policy has welcomed overseas students and made the admission procedure easier. Every year, several schools allocate hundreds of seats to international students. "I applied to the system (study in Egypt) in a very simple way." "Egypt is a warm and welcoming community."

Domain B: Building Social Network at the New Country of Study:

Theme B.1: Academic Related Network

International students attended a welcoming orientation session at the start of their first year. Following that, they were involved in a variety of study activities with both domestic

and international students. This aided them in developing strong social networks with their co-workers. "Our section includes international students from various countries." We became acquainted during the lengthy hours of educational sessions." Other thoughts on networking with Egyptian students?

Theme B.2: Non-Academic Network

Some overseas students have roommate peers from other universities. They knew some acquaintances from the university hostel where they slept. They were more similar to students from their native countries studying in schools other than medicine. International students who stayed at the university hostel had more opportunities to make friends than those who stayed in private flats.

Theme B.3: International Acquaintances

International students felt more connected to one another than domestic students since they shared the same experiences of being foreigners. "I believe that other international students share the same feelings."

Theme B.4: Arab Acquaintances

Some domestic students volunteered to assist international students. Some people assisted them in teaching them Arabic. Others directed them through the curriculum and venues of the school.

Theme B.5: Local Acquaintances

They needed to learn Arabic in order to interact with the Egyptian community. Communication with the general population assisted them in learning some of the spoken Arabic language at the market or on public transportation. Some of them began taking Arabic classes online or in person. Others attempted to watch YouTube videos. "Learning a few common words helped me become more acquainted with the community."

Domain C: Expectations and Challenges during their Educational Journey

Theme C.1: Studying Medicine is a Difficult Task

They had heard from senior students that they needed to study hard in order to pass tests at medical school. Some people were afraid of failing. "What if I don't pass this year?" Should I give it another shot?"

Theme C.2: Language Barrier

The majority of international students recognised the significant problem they experienced due to the language barrier, not only at school but also during daily activities. Some of them raised the issue of patient communication during therapeutic sessions.

This ensures that the spoken Arabic language is learned by overseas pupils. "Who will help us with patients during clinical sessions?" They realised that as overseas students, they were concerned that they would need to put in more effort and time than their colleagues in order to achieve academic success.

Theme C.3: Intercultural Differences

Intercultural differences presented additional challenge for international students. Many of them expressed a desire to learn more about Egyptian culture before travelling to Egypt. "Is there a specific dress code in Egypt?" they wondered. "Having a booklet for international students might be helpful."

Theme C.4: Daily (Social) Problems

Some of the students have encountered social issues since their arrival in Egypt, including one who became lost in the streets on her first day in Egypt while returning from school to her dormitory. Others required recommendations for an optician and a restaurant. They recognised the native Egyptians' welcome attitude and eagerness to guide and assist them.

Theme C.5: Health Concerns

Most of them were concerned about their medical state, particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic, and how they would be treated if they become infected. "Where should we isolate ourselves?" "What about our roommates if we have to stay at home alone?"

Domain D: Suggestions to Improve the International Student Conditions

Theme D.1: Events and Activities

They praised the performance of the international students' office's non-academic events and activities, which aided collaboration and integration of international students into the university environment. They had heard about the school's tourist tours and cultural programmes and encouraged more of the same. "I'd like to demonstrate my culture to my coworkers." "It will be interesting to share cuisine with both domestic and international students." Some of their events have been rescheduled as a result of COVID-19. "During the break, I wish I had gone scuba diving and visited beautiful places in Egypt."

Theme D.2: Mentorship Program

Some overseas students suggested that a mentorship programme would assist them become acquainted with the educational system more quickly and easily. Mentors could be senior students, both domestic and international. Because of the language and administrative characteristics, international students of the same nationality may be useful.

Theme D.3: Institutional Arabic Course

Although learning Arabic was not a requirement for overseas students applying, some students recommended that adding an Arabic course to their programme would be extremely beneficial.

Theme D.4: Online Education during the Pandemic

Due to the global pandemic and consequent academic stoppage, many overseas students returned to their home nations. Face-to-face classes were replaced with synchronous and asynchronous online sessions at the university. Synchronous interactive sessions were favored by the students. "It's difficult to concentrate during the online lectures." "It would be preferable if professors gave us live lectures instead of videos so that we could understand more." "A forum would be helpful for more explanation or clarification on a topic."

Theme D.5: Study Conflicts due to the Pandemic

International students were torn between returning to their home countries and remaining in Egypt until school resumed. "We are concerned about returning home because our parents are concerned about us." We are unable to make a decision." "We long for home." If they return to their own nations, they may encounter shuttered airports. "What should we do if we have to return to Egypt to take the exams?"

Discussion

The current study sought to ascertain the difficulties and expectations of medical overseas students.

One of the motives for studying in Egypt was the availability of scholarships and financial aid for school. The cost of study and accommodation facilities is critical in an international student's decision to choose a host country, since a high charge may appear to be an impediment to studying abroad ^[20,21].

Students in the current study valued their Academic related network since, like medical students in Germany, they spent long hours on campus ^[21]. Making friends with international students assisted them in sharing their homesickness and emotional constraints, which are shared by other international students ^[8,9,21].

The language barrier is regarded as a key problem in the academic and social lives of medical overseas students ^[21]. They saw it as a big impediment to communicating with patients, especially in an Arab country where the majority of the population does not speak English. Linguistic support is essential to overcome this barrier, ideally upon arrival in the host country ^[22]. Simultaneously, because English is not their first language and is the official study language, international students may require specific medical terminology classes ^[23].

One of the difficulties that students in this study encountered was intercultural difference. According to Pemberton et al. ^[24], distinct

forms of cultural capital (objective, embodied, and institutional) differ among cultures and have an impact on the process of acculturation. Cultural capital refers to the assets that assist pupils in achieving social mobility. Cultural capital is classified into three types: embodied (e.g., lifestyle), objectified (e.g., books), and institutionalised (e.g., educational qualifications). According to Pemberton et al., institutional culture is the most important form for international medical students ^[24], particularly the educational cultural feature indicated in Domain B.

Aside from the alterations in their goals and lives caused by the COVID-19 epidemic. They were able to express their challenges, expectations, and concerns about their studies in Egypt. The effects of COVID-19 are widespread. According to the programme director at the institution ^[19], international students at the institution of Iceland suffered as a result of the university's closure due to the COVID-19 lockdown and the difficulty of returning home. Students' anxieties were exposed in the current survey.

Mentoring programs are believed to have a good impact on international students' life. Mentors can be their seniors or school faculty members who give them with academic and non-academic help. Pemberton et al. ^[24] agreed, particularly during the recent COVID-19 epidemic.

Limitations and Recommendations

Because the study was designed as a focus group discussion, the interviewees' perspectives may have been influenced by the interviewer. Furthermore, due to the small number of participants, data analysis with regard to nationalities was not possible. Due to the lockdown, using emails to collect the remaining data from the FGD may have some restrictions because face-to-face interaction was disallowed. Because the study participants were volunteers, they did not reflect the entire group, so additional research is required.

Conclusions

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to look into the challenges and expectations of international medical students in Egypt. Medical overseas students would benefit from a mentorship programme, an Arabic language course, and intercultural activities. During a catastrophe such as the global COVID-19 outbreak, extra social support is essential.

Ethical Considerations

The School of Medicine, Ain Shams University Ethics Committee in Cairo, Egypt, granted ethical permission (FMASU R 16 / 2020). The students agreed to take part in this study voluntarily. The information was kept private and anonymous. Students have the option to refuse participation or withdraw from the study.

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Table 1: Profile of Participating Students (N=20)

Characteristic	N (%)
Gender	
Male	10 (50%)
Female	10 (50%)
Continent of origin	
Asia	13 (65%)
Africa	7 (35%)
Scholarship	
Full scholarship	5 (25%)
No scholarship	15 (75%)

Table 2: Questioning Route used by the Researcher to guide the Focus Group

1. What were your motives to start studying medicine abroad? Why Egypt? What's your previous knowledge about studying in Egypt? Have you known about Egyptian schools or Egyptian physicians?
2. Have you already built up a social network at your new home?
3. Which expectations or worries do you have concerning your future studies with respect to the existing cultural differences?
4. In your opinion, what is important for the successful integration of international students? (Both external and internal factors)
5. In your opinion, is there any need for improvement of the existing conditions?
6. Which dreams have been fulfilled? Which dreams seem not to be fulfilled?