

Developing a Counseling Model Based on the Lived Experiences of International Students Studying in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to develop a counseling model based on the lived experiences of international students studying in Iran.

Methods and Materials: The research method was qualitative in nature. The study population included international students of Allameh Tabataba'i University during the 2023–2024 academic year. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Findings derived from interview analyses were extracted in the form of four main categories and 16 subcategories.

Findings: The results of qualitative data analysis revealed that the counseling model based on the lived experiences of international students studying in Iran consists of four stages: (1) raising awareness and promoting cultural-social adaptation, (2) providing psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs, (3) strengthening social networks and receiving social support, and (4) offering academic-educational guidance and accessing organizational support. The content validity of the counseling model based on the lived experiences of international students was determined using two indices: content validity index (CVI = 0.93) and content validity ratio (CVR = 0.87).

Conclusion: It is recommended that universities organize specialized training courses for counselors to familiarize them with the challenges and issues faced by international students and to enhance the provision of effective counseling.

Keywords: lived experiences, international students in Iran, lived experience-based counselling.

1. Introduction

International students have significant positive impacts academically, economically, and socially. They contribute to strengthening international relations, economic growth, scientific innovation, and solving global challenges (Mbous et al., 2024). Therefore, supporting international

students and providing suitable conditions for their education benefits both host countries and the students themselves. A globally accepted reality regarding international students is a combination of challenges and opportunities (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Despite existing difficulties, studying abroad can provide immense

opportunities for personal and professional growth. Many students overcome these challenges, achieve great success, and find that their cultural and educational experiences profoundly impact their careers and lives (Wong & Hyde, 2024).

In 2016, the total number of international students enrolled in universities worldwide increased to 4 million. This figure had doubled from the 2 million students enrolled globally in 2000 (Consoli et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022). Student satisfaction is a primary goal for universities. Satisfied student populations represent a competitive advantage, with outcomes such as positive word-of-mouth communication, student retention, and loyalty. Delivering superior customer value is critical in creating a sustainable advantage in the highly competitive international education market (Kotler & Fox, 1995; McBeath & Bager-Charleson, 2023). Universities are expected to address the challenges of cultural diversity, varying learning styles, and the changing needs of students who now have a much broader range of study destinations, academic programs, and learning environments than ever before. The international education market has become highly attractive for universities, offering both financial and non-financial benefits to institutions and their respective countries. Like many other organizations, universities are concerned about market share (Singh et al., 2022).

Considering the diversity of students, differences in learning styles, prior life experiences, and the variety of services offered by universities, the perception of overall service performance can vary. This creates a major challenge for universities in maintaining a consistent standard of service delivery (Consoli et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2015). Students' perceptions of service performance are shaped by their attitudes, which are influenced by their expectations. These attitudes can be expressed positively or negatively. If a negative attitude is formed, achieving overall satisfaction becomes difficult, potentially leading to complaints, reduced loyalty, and negative promotion (Consoli et al., 2022; Martirosyan et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for universities to manage students' perceptions of service performance to improve their attitudes toward the institution.

International students face challenges such as acculturation stress, discrimination, low acceptance from universities in host countries, and adaptation difficulties. Some students struggle to adapt to cultural differences or connect with communities in the host country. This leads to psychological issues among international students, such as

culture shock, language barriers, and homesickness. Acculturation stress occurs when individuals adopt a culture unfamiliar to them, leading to adaptation difficulties and frustration in addressing the challenges of a new culture, which in turn causes stress (Le & LaCost, 2017; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Yu & Wright, 2017).

International students also have limited resources upon arrival in the host country. For example, domestic students often have access to loans and scholarships that are unavailable to international students (Ibrahim et al., 2021). International students experience additional stressors (Moore et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015). The psychological and physical burden of adaptation is a primary cause of acculturation stress (Han et al., 2017). Several studies have indicated that acculturation stress is a common cause of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and suicide risks among international students (Consoli et al., 2022; Han et al., 2017; McBeath & Bager-Charleson, 2023; Singh et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the importance of utilizing various counseling services, such as academic and personal counseling, career counseling, financial counseling, and life counseling, for international students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method employed in this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology, as a research method, focuses on studying phenomena and describing the structures of lived and conscious experiences without referencing pre-existing theories, hypothetical-deductive reasoning, or prior assumptions. Phenomenology views the individual as part of their environment, and its primary focus is the analysis of individuals' conscious experiences to clarify the structure and essence of the phenomena as they occur in real life. This approach seeks to understand phenomena by interpreting individuals' real-life experiences. Since this study aimed to understand the lived experiences of international students when facing challenges and issues, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Open-ended questions and in-depth interviews were used to explore the psychological effects and reactions to conflicts arising from being away from home. Unlike purely quantitative studies, this approach relied on participants' verbal reports of their experiences as data. Using a few open-ended questions, the researcher explored the views of a sample of individuals involved in the phenomenon under study.

The research population consisted of newly enrolled and senior international students studying during the 2023–2024 academic year in various faculties of Allameh Tabataba'i University. The sample size ranged from 20 to 40 participants, determined based on theoretical saturation. Purposeful sampling was used, as is common in qualitative studies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants until theoretical saturation was reached. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews to determine the lived experiences of international students in dealing with conflicts caused by being away from home. Comprehensive interviews aimed to explore one or more key themes while respecting the structure and framework of respondents' perspectives. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and prepared for analysis and coding.

2.2. Data Collection

The study used documents, interviews, and questionnaires for data collection. Below is an explanation of each:

(a) Document Analysis: To review the literature and background of the topic, reputable articles, dissertations, and academic websites were used. Since there is a lack of comprehensive work on this subject in universities and higher education centers, the researcher faced a shortage of resources. Therefore, the researcher relied on numerous international articles, books, and academic websites, translating relevant sections as needed.

(b) Interviews: Another data collection tool was semi-structured interviews. The researcher conducted interviews with international students to capture their opinions and ideas. A key advantage of this method is the ability to collect consistent data from all respondents while obtaining deeper insights than fully structured methods. This approach also allows the researcher to gather extensive and in-depth information from interviewees, tailored to the research objectives and questions.

2.3. Data Analysis

For analyzing the interviews, Colaizzi's seven-step content analysis method was employed. The steps are as follows:

1. The transcribed text of each interview was read multiple times to gain a general understanding of the content.
2. For each transcript, statements directly addressing the research questions were identified. These statements were written on separate sheets, including page numbers for reference.
3. A theme was assigned to each identified statement.
4. Formulated meanings were categorized into themes, clusters, and networks of themes.
5. Findings were integrated into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study.
6. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon was described.
7. Finally, the validity of the findings was evaluated by member checking, comparing the researcher's interpretations with participants' experiences.

To validate the developed model, Lawshe's method for content validity was used, employing a scoring system from 1 (weakest) to 10 (excellent). Results were calculated by summing and averaging the scores. The protocol content was presented to experts for evaluation.

The CVR index, designed by Lawshe, was calculated using the opinions of experts in the content area. Experts were asked to classify each therapeutic component in the protocol using a three-point Likert scale: "essential," "useful but not essential," and "not necessary." The acceptable CVR values, based on the number of experts evaluating the scale items, were defined by Lawshe (1975) and are presented below. The larger the number of participating experts, the lower the acceptable CVR threshold.

Table 1

The Results of CVR

Number of Experts	CVR Value	Number of Experts	CVR Value	Number of Experts	CVR Value
5	0.99	11	0.59	25	0.37
6	0.99	12	0.56	3	0.33
7	0.99	13	0.54	35	0.31
8	0.75	14	0.51	4	0.29
9	0.78	15	0.49		
1	0.62	2	0.42		

To ensure the accuracy and validity of the data, Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four criteria were applied. To verify the credibility of the data after analysis, each interview was returned to participants for confirmation and necessary revisions. To ensure confirmability, the researcher minimized the influence of prior assumptions during data collection. Dependability and adequacy were established through guidance and supervision from expert advisors and qualitative research specialists. Interview transcripts were reviewed by experts and a qualitative research specialist to

validate coding. To enhance transferability to other contexts, efforts were made to include students from diverse nationalities and varying social and economic statuses.

3. Findings and Results

This section reports the findings from the content analysis of data collected from international students studying in Iran. A total of 20 students participated in the study, and their demographic information is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant Code	Nationality	Gender	Education Level	Age
1	Iraq	Male	PhD	34
2	Syria	Male	Master's	26
3	Afghanistan	Male	Bachelor's	23
4	Afghanistan	Male	Bachelor's	23
5	Afghanistan	Female	Master's	30
6	India	Male	PhD	36
7	Afghanistan	Male	Master's	28
8	Pakistan	Male	PhD	38
9	Afghanistan	Male	PhD	37
10	Bangladesh	Male	Master's	22
11	Afghanistan	Female	Bachelor's	22
12	India	Male	Master's	27
13	Syria	Male	PhD	36
14	Iraq	Female	Master's	30
15	Syria	Male	Master's	24
16	Afghanistan	Male	Bachelor's	22
17	Iraq	Male	Master's	26
18	Pakistan	Male	Master's	26
19	Palestine	Male	Master's	27
20	Afghanistan	Female	Master's	24

According to [Table 3](#), the findings derived from interview analysis were classified into four main categories and 16 subcategories. These main categories addressed the research questions about the challenges and issues faced by

international students (academic, administrative, cultural, and social challenges), their needs, and the services they received. Each main category is detailed below, with examples and quotes from participants included.

Table 3

Main and Subcategories

Main Categories	Subcategories
Stage of Awareness and Cultural-Social Adaptation	<p>Familiarity with social norms and customs of the host country's culture</p> <p>Language differences and lack of proficiency in the host country's language</p> <p>Awareness of educational and welfare facilities at the university</p> <p>Familiarity with the academic structure of the host country</p> <p>Lifestyle changes and adjustment in meeting basic needs</p>
Stage of Psychological Support and Addressing Basic Psychological Needs	<p>Experiencing negative emotions (anxiety/stress and depression)</p> <p>Being away from family, loneliness, and homesickness</p> <p>Individual coping styles</p>
Stage of Strengthening Social Networks and Receiving Social Support	<p>Interaction and empathy between Iranian and non-Iranian students</p> <p>Behavior and relationships with neighbors in university housing</p> <p>Strengthening relationships between professors and international students</p>
Stage of Academic Guidance and Organizational Support	<p>Different educational systems and teaching methods</p> <p>Insufficient understanding of courses offered in the academic program</p> <p>Lack of connection with the International Students Center</p> <p>Financial pressures and living expenses</p> <p>Perception of discrimination</p>

This theme includes four subcategories. The analysis revealed that cultural and social adaptation were highlighted in all interviews. Educational migration involves cultural and social challenges, often accompanied by cultural shock. Cultural shock is defined as the stress and anxiety resulting from encountering a new culture and the confusion, ambiguity, and inability caused by separation from familiar social values and norms. For international students, this issue is more complex due to their separation from both familiar communities and their families. Gradual adaptation and cultural recovery are expected stages. The final stage, acculturation, involves constructively engaging with the new society and resolving cultural shocks. This requires a deep understanding of the new culture and reflection on one's cultural identity. The host culture's tolerance and acceptance of differences play a crucial role in cultural-social adaptation. Subcategories include familiarity with social norms and customs of the host country's culture, language differences and lack of proficiency in the host country's language, awareness of educational and welfare facilities at the university, and familiarity with the academic structure of the host country.

Psychological support and addressing the basic psychological needs of international students are critical. These students face cultural changes, separation from family, and academic pressures, leading to challenges. Social support is essential, as isolation from family can be difficult for students, and establishing social networks can help alleviate this feeling. Managing stress and anxiety is

another challenge, and providing training in stress management techniques, such as meditation and breathing exercises, is beneficial. Cultural awareness workshops can help students understand cultural expectations and adapt to their new environment, while encouraging self-awareness and recognition of personal needs aids in addressing challenges effectively. Access to multilingual counseling services tailored to cultural differences is also vital. Subcategories include lifestyle changes and adjustment in meeting basic needs, experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, and depression, being away from family and experiencing loneliness and homesickness, and individual coping styles.

Strengthening social networks and receiving social support are essential for international students. Establishing connections through student groups and associations helps students build meaningful relationships, while participating in cultural events and festivals provides opportunities to share experiences and understand different cultures. Technology plays a key role, with social media platforms enabling students to stay connected with family and friends, reducing feelings of isolation. Universities can facilitate this by creating online groups where international students exchange information and experiences. Additionally, fostering a supportive environment in academic and social settings enhances students' sense of security and belonging. Subcategories include interaction and empathy between Iranian and non-Iranian students, behavior and relationships

with neighbors in university housing, and strengthening relationships between professors and international students.

This theme includes five subcategories. Academic guidance and organizational support are essential for the success of international students. Universities often have academic advisors who assist students with course selection, academic planning, and time management. Workshops on academic skills, such as note-taking and scientific writing, can be highly beneficial. Providing information on scholarships and financial aid helps students manage educational and living expenses. Counseling services play a critical role in addressing academic and social pressures. Facilitating group discussions and workshops where international students share their experiences can reduce feelings of isolation, while ensuring access to educational resources, such as books and scientific articles, supports learning. Subcategories include different educational systems and teaching methods, insufficient understanding of courses offered in the academic program, lack of connection with the International Students Center, financial pressures and living expenses, and perception of discrimination.

The counseling model was validated using a qualitative approach. For qualitative face validity, individual questions were provided to 10 psychologists specializing in counseling international students, and their feedback was incorporated. Quantitative validation employed the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI). According to Lawshe's table, the minimum CVR for 10 experts was 0.62, while a CVI of 0.79 or higher was recommended for item acceptance. Evaluation scales included three options for CVR ("essential," "useful but not essential," and "not necessary") and four options for CVI ("not related," "needs major revision," "related but needs revision," and "completely related").

4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the findings, the subcategories of the counseling model highlight the challenges faced by international students studying in Iran. These challenges, identified through interviews, include academic, administrative, and cultural-social difficulties. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Wu et al., 2015; Yu & Wright, 2017).

The academic challenges of international students include difficulties in understanding the Persian language, accessing academic resources, and navigating the precise academic curriculum. Many international students reported struggles

in finding textbooks and materials in their native languages. Regarding language, previous studies have indicated that international students often face language proficiency issues, which affect their academic performance and participation (Yu & Wright, 2017). Additionally, the lack of academic counseling services or tutoring for international students exacerbates these challenges (Wu et al., 2015). Financially, tuition costs are generally higher for international students than domestic ones, with limited scholarships available. Moreover, the high cost of living in Iran, particularly in large cities like Tehran, increases financial pressures, making basic needs such as housing and food difficult to afford. Moore et al. (2021) also noted that scholarship options are often limited for international students, hindering their ability to secure financial support for their education (Moore et al., 2021).

In terms of administrative challenges, navigating visa processes proved to be difficult for many international students, with some reporting delays or rejections in their visa applications. Additionally, Iranian universities may not provide the same level of institutional support for international students as universities in other countries, which makes navigating administrative and bureaucratic processes more challenging for them (Babak et al., 2024).

Social and cultural adaptation challenges were another significant concern reported by international students. Iranian culture may differ greatly from the culture of international students' home countries, making it difficult for them to communicate and form friendships within Iranian society. Differences in clothing styles, social customs, and religious practices can lead to feelings of isolation or confusion (Azimi et al., 2023; Khorasani & Zamani Manesh, 2012).

The main categories of the counseling model identified in the study include four stages: awareness and cultural-social adaptation, psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs, strengthening social networks and receiving social support, and academic guidance and organizational support. These findings align with prior studies (Wong & Hyde, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2017).

The first main category, awareness and cultural-social adaptation, includes four subcategories: familiarity with social norms and customs of the host country's culture, language differences and lack of proficiency in the host country's language, awareness of educational and welfare facilities at the university, and familiarity with the academic structure of the host country. The importance of cultural and social adaptation lies in its role in the process of an

individual's adjustment to the culture, norms, and values of a new society (Azimi et al., 2023). Cultural and social adaptation involves five dimensions: understanding the new culture, which includes learning about the customs, language, behaviors, and social values of the new society; adapting to norms, which involves learning and accepting the societal rules and norms prevalent in the new environment; forming social relationships to reduce feelings of loneliness and foster a sense of belonging; managing differences by facing and accepting cultural and social diversity; and emotional and social support, which provides access to supportive and counseling resources that facilitate adaptation. Although this process can be challenging, successful adaptation helps individuals feel a greater sense of belonging and comfort in their new environment. Cultural and social adaptation can significantly impact mental health, academic success, and quality of life (Wu et al., 2015).

The second main category, psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs, includes four subcategories: lifestyle changes and adjustment in meeting basic needs, experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, and depression, being away from family and experiencing loneliness and homesickness, and individual coping styles. Psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs are critical for individual and social mental health (Mbous et al., 2024). These needs include the need for security, ensuring a sense of safety and confidence in the living environment and social relationships; the need for belonging, as humans require social connections and a sense of inclusion in groups and communities; the need for self-worth, which involves receiving validation and recognition from others to enhance self-esteem and confidence; the need for autonomy, allowing individuals to have control over their decisions and choices; and the need for growth and progress, as individuals seek opportunities for personal development and learning. Psychological support, through counseling, support groups, and social activities, helps address these needs. Creating spaces where individuals can share their emotions and experiences strengthens mental health (Consoli et al., 2022; Mbous et al., 2024). Psychological support is particularly important for international students, who often face challenges such as separation from family, academic pressure, cultural adjustment, and loneliness, all of which can affect their mental health. Some studies have shown that workshops on coping skills, stress management, and communication skills can enhance resilience and improve the quality of life for

international students (Azimi et al., 2023; Babak et al., 2024).

The third stage of the counseling model, based on the experiences of international students, includes three subcategories: interaction and empathy between Iranian and non-Iranian students, behavior and relationships with neighbors in university housing, and strengthening relationships between professors and international students. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, and material resources individuals receive from others, helping them cope with life's challenges. Emotional support includes expressions of love, empathy, and understanding, which provide individuals with a sense of security and value. Informational support involves offering advice, guidance, or useful information to help individuals make better decisions. Material support includes financial or material aid, such as providing resources or services during times of need. Social support also facilitates opportunities for social connections and positive interactions, enhancing a sense of belonging and reducing loneliness (Singh et al., 2022; Wong & Hyde, 2024).

Social support plays a crucial role in improving individuals' mental and general health, particularly during stressful or challenging times. It can come from family, friends, colleagues, or social groups (Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Wu et al., 2015). For international students, strengthening social networks and receiving social support is particularly important. They can join cultural or academic associations or student groups to exchange experiences and support one another. Using applications and social networks like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram can help maintain connections with friends and family. Participation in workshops, seminars, and cultural or sports activities provides opportunities to meet other students and strengthen social relationships. Connecting with local students facilitates better understanding of new cultural norms and practices, enhancing a sense of belonging. Forming study groups or collaborative projects fosters professional and friendly connections among international students. Creating spaces for mutual support and experience-sharing can reduce loneliness and boost confidence. Many universities offer counseling and support services to help international students manage stress and social challenges.

The fourth stage of the counseling model involves five subcategories: differences in educational systems and teaching methods, insufficient understanding of the courses offered in academic programs, lack of connection with the International Students Center, financial pressures and living

costs, and perceived discrimination. Academic guidance is vital in addressing some of the disparities and discriminatory factors that international students may face, such as racial and cultural biases. International students might encounter prejudices or discrimination based on socio-economic differences, nationality, race, or culture. Additionally, perceived discrimination stemming from language barriers exacerbates their adaptation challenges. Educational and academic guidance can facilitate their learning process by addressing these issues.

International students often struggle to understand new educational systems, assessment methods, and academic requirements. Academic and educational guidance can provide the necessary information for success in these areas (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Academic guidance may also include career counseling, helping students plan their career paths and access job opportunities in the new country. Studying abroad can be stressful, and educational guidance can assist students in managing these pressures, giving them a sense of belonging and support (Ibrahim et al., 2021).

The findings suggest that the intervention program derived from the counseling model encompasses four stages: awareness and cultural-social adaptation, psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs, strengthening social networks and receiving social support, and academic guidance and organizational support. Content validity was evaluated using two indicators: a content validity index of 0.93 and a content validity ratio of 0.87.

The four-stage intervention program addresses all challenges and issues faced by international students. In the first stage, awareness and cultural-social adaptation, international students familiarize themselves with the host country's culture and social norms while focusing on cultural-social adaptation to ensure their integration. The second stage, psychological support and addressing basic psychological needs, tackles issues like loneliness, homesickness, and psychological stressors such as anxiety, depression, and coping strategies, empowering students to manage negative emotions. The third stage, strengthening social networks and receiving social support, emphasizes managing interactions, fostering empathy, and perceived social support to reduce negative emotions and psychological tensions, ultimately enhancing students' mental health and quality of life. The fourth stage, academic guidance and organizational support, specifically addresses international students' educational challenges, offering specialized counseling on learning methods and financial management.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Accessing participants proved challenging. Some students, due to their busy schedules, were unwilling to participate in the study. In qualitative research, establishing a close relationship with participants is essential for collecting rich and in-depth data. However, this interaction may introduce reciprocal influences between the researcher and participant, potentially affecting the outcomes. The interview and data analysis process in qualitative studies is lengthy and time-consuming, which prolonged data collection. Researchers must have the ability to categorize and interpret data, which can be influenced by their cognitive and academic capabilities.

The qualitative nature of this study limits its generalizability. To support decision-making, the study should be complemented by quantitative methods. Differences in educational levels and socio-economic statuses among the sample could not be controlled. Comparing the experiences of students with previous international education experience to those of first-time international students may highlight differences. Some students utilized specialized psychological counseling services for international education challenges, using technical psychological terms like attachment styles or schemas, which caused significant variation in extracted interview codes. Cultural or social considerations might have deterred some students from sharing their experiences, leading to a lack of robust data.

The diversity of cultural backgrounds among international students could result in differing counseling needs, making it difficult to create a comprehensive model. Environmental and social conditions in Iran might influence students' experiences, and such variables may not have been fully accounted for in the counseling model. Language barriers also impacted communication and data exchange, as some students lacked sufficient proficiency in Persian.

Future research should investigate challenges and issues faced by international students across different academic levels. Long-term and multi-phase controlled studies are recommended to assess the sustainability of the counseling model's intervention program. Gender-specific research on international students' challenges and the effectiveness of the counseling program is also suggested. Developing continuous evaluation processes to measure the counseling model's effectiveness and incorporate student feedback is essential.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors equally contributed to this article.

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