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Journal of International Students

Volume 16, Issue 15 (2026), pp. 197-218

ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)

jistudents.org

<https://doi.org/10.32674/rdkzkq36>



Bridging Cultures: Factors Influencing the Academic and Social Experiences of International Students at a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education is a global priority, with international students fostering intercultural awareness and competencies. This study examined English language fluency, acculturative stress, and social connectedness among international students at the University of the Western Cape. A mixed-methods design was employed, including a structured survey of 256 students, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 with descriptive and inferential statistics. The participants were predominantly male (53.9%), were aged 30–38 years and were pursuing postgraduate degrees (78.9%). Most lived alone (73.8%) and were unmarried (53.5%). Students reported high English proficiency but experienced moderate challenges with home sickness, discrimination, insecurity, and cultural adjustment. English fluency was negatively correlated with acculturative stress ($r = -0.221, p < .05$), whereas social connectedness explained 33% of the variance in stress ($r = -0.573, p < .05$). Language proficiency and social engagement influence adaptation, emphasizing the need for inclusive practices that support academic and emotional well-being.

Keywords: International students, Acculturative stress, English language fluency, Social connectedness, Higher education, South Africa

Introduction

International students are a vital source of diversity within institutions of higher education, bringing fresh perspectives and fostering intercultural awareness and engagement among members of the campus community (Qu & Cross, 2024). Their presence creates opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interactions, which can enhance global competencies, leadership skills, and intellectual development for all students (Bartel-Radic & Cucchi, 2025). In this way, international students contribute significantly to the broader internationalization efforts pursued by higher education institutions (Agbaje, 2021). As key drivers of internationalization, universities strive to attract top students from around the world for both study and research (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). More than 1.5 million students are studying abroad at any given time (Granato et al., 2024). Globally, the number of students pursuing tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased significantly—from 1.3 million in 1990 to approximately 5 million by 2015 (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018). South Africa has also witnessed a steady increase in the number of international students accessing South African universities.

As of 2016, South Africa hosted approximately 73,895 international students (DHET). While recent national-level data remain unpublished, estimates based on historical trends suggest continued enrollment growth, possibly exceeding 95,000 by 2024. This growing appeal is primarily due to South Africa's relatively high educational standards and political and economic stability, especially compared with the conditions in many of the students' home countries (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021).

However, these students often find themselves in university environments that differ significantly from the cultural norms and practices to which they are accustomed. As a result, they are required to navigate new educational systems, social behaviors, expectations, and organizational structures. This process of adjustment is not unique to international students, but the challenges they face are often more complex because of cultural and linguistic differences (Oduwaye, Kiraz, & Sorakin, 2023). Sarı and Yüce (2020) further emphasized that these difficulties can be compounded when students are unaware of the cultural or developmental differences between their home and host countries. Misguided assumptions that the new environment operates similarly to their home society can lead to confusion, disorientation, and increased stress. These challenges not only affect students' overall well-being but can also hinder their academic success and social integration (Sarı & Yuçe, 2020).

English language proficiency is vital for international students' academic and social experiences since it influences their ability to comprehend lectures, participate in conversations, and complete assignments effectively (Yu et al., 2025). Language limitations can have a detrimental effect on social integration and academic achievement by causing miscommunication, decreasing classroom

engagement, and negatively affecting relationships with teachers and peers (Wang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2022). The psychological effects of adjusting to a new cultural setting, known as acculturative stress, can result in identity uncertainty, anxiety, and sadness. Students' general well-being, academic performance, and mental health can all be adversely affected by high levels of acculturative stress (Choy et al., 2021; Soufi, Majzoobi, & Forstmeier, 2024). Social connectedness, the degree of interpersonal ties and a sense of belonging can decrease feelings of isolation and acculturative stress, offer emotional support and increase individuals' ability to adapt. On the other hand, a lack of social ties might make stress worse and make it more difficult to integrate successfully into the host institution (Wickramaratne et al., 2022).

Globally, internationalization continues to expand, with recent studies highlighting the role of language and belonging in shaping adaptation outcomes (Ersoy & Akçaoğlu, 2025; Wallen et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2023). Given the growing number of international students in South Africa, understanding the unique challenges they face in adapting to a new cultural and academic environment is crucial. Despite the country's rising status as a destination for tertiary education in Africa, limited research has explored the specific factors influencing the educational and social experiences of international students within this context (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021). International students in South Africa frequently encounter acculturative stress and challenges with social integration, influenced by factors such as English language proficiency, which affects their ability to engage in academic and social settings, and levels of social connectedness, including the extent of their relationships with host nationals and fellow international students, which can either mitigate or exacerbate feelings of isolation and cultural dissonance. These challenges can significantly affect their academic performance and overall university experience (Kristiana et al., 2022; Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024). However, there is a gap in the empirical research exploring how these variables interact with and impact student academic outcomes in South Africa. This study seeks to assess the levels of English language fluency, acculturative stress, and social connectedness among international students and how these factors influence their educational experiences at the University of the Western Cape. Recent studies published in the *Journal of International Students* (JIS) emphasize that social belonging, peer interaction, and institutional support are critical factors influencing international students' academic success and psychological well-being (Glass & Westmont, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2023). This aligns with findings from the 2025 JIS Special Issue on mobility and belonging, which highlights the centrality of institutional climate in shaping adaptation outcomes."

METHODS

The study was conducted at a significant, historically marginalized public university situated in a major urban center in South Africa. The school has a longstanding dedication to advancing social fairness and facilitating educational access for marginalized people.

The university's student enrollment was approximately 23,000 during the research period. The demographic composition of the student body was as follows: approximately 15,840 undergraduates and 6,160 postgraduates. The students were primarily female (61%). The racial composition varied, with 47% of the students identifying as Black African, 44% as Colored, 5% as White, 3% as Indian, and 2% as other. The university accommodated a modest international student population, accounting for 3.5% of total enrollment.

Study Population and Sample

Among the approximately 23,000 students registered at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the 2015 academic year, 2,173 were international students. Yamane's formula was used to calculate the appropriate sample size, resulting in a target of approximately 330 students. A list of registered international students was obtained from the university's International Relations Office, and every third student was randomly selected. This random sampling ensured that each student had an equal and independent chance of selection (Sessler & Imrey, 2015). Eligible participants were registered international students at UWC aged 18 and above who resided outside South Africa.

Data collection and instruments

The study was approved by the university's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent before data collection. Data for this phase were collected using an online, self-administered questionnaire developed from the literature reviews of relevant articles (Sehoolo, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008; Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2022; Lee & Rice, 2007). The researcher distributed the questionnaire to students online via email, WhatsApp, and other social media, following approval from the Ethics Committee of the selected university in South Africa. It remained accessible for two months. After this period, the survey was closed, and no further responses were accepted. Response counts were monitored throughout, and reminders were sent every two weeks. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

Section A: Demographic Characteristics

Participants provided information on age, sex, marital status, year and level of study, country of origin, duration of stay in South Africa, faculty, and native language.

Section B: Self-Reported Fluency in English (SRFE)

English fluency was assessed using a composite score derived from four questions rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very poor, 5 = very good). The questions assessed participants' ability to understand professors during lectures, participate in class discussions, engage in English conversations, and write academic papers. Scores ranged from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating greater fluency. The reliability of the SRFE scale has previously been demonstrated, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 (Bujang, Omar, & Baharum, 2018).

Section C: Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS)

The ASSIS measures acculturative stress using 36 items across seven subscales: perceived discrimination (8 items), homesickness (4), perceived hate (5), fear (4), stress due to change (3), guilt (2), and miscellaneous (10). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with total scores ranging from 36 to 180. Higher scores reflect higher levels of perceived stress (Bujang, Omar, & Baharum, 2018). The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha and Guttman split-half reliability coefficient of 0.96 (Nguyen & Meirmanov, 2019).

Section D: Social Connectedness Scale (SCS)

The SCS was developed to measure individuals' perceived sense of interpersonal closeness. The 20-item scale uses a five-point Likert format and includes both positively and negatively worded items (the latter reverse scored). Total scores range from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater social connectedness. The scale has shown high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 in a diverse international student sample (Khoury, Vergara, & Spinelli, 2022).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS, version 26, by applying both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Responses from the SRFE, ASSIS, and SCS scales were coded according to standard guidelines and entered into Microsoft Excel 2010 for initial scoring and organization. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sociodemographic characteristics of the international students.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Study Sample

A total of 330 international students were invited to participate in the study. Of these, 256 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 77.6%. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Appendix 1. More than half of the respondents (53.9%) were male. The overall mean age of the participants ranged from 30–38 years ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.98$). The mean age for male participants was 108.36 ($SD = 23.377$), whereas for females, it was 109.14 ($SD = 24.902$); however, these values appear to reflect coded or scaled data rather than actual ages. In terms of marital status, more than half of the respondents (53.5%) reported never having been married, while 43.8% reported being married or having a domestic partner. Despite this, most participants (73.8%) reported living alone. Most of the international students (78.9%) were enrolled in postgraduate programs, including honors, master's, and doctoral degrees. Additionally, a vast majority (96.1%) of the participants were from Africa (Appendix 1).

Self-reported Fluency in English (N= 256)

The English fluency levels of 256 respondents across four functional domains were analyzed in Appendix 2: understanding professors in class, participation in discussions, conversational skills, and academic writing. The highest mean score was for understanding professors in class, indicating strongly receptive language skills. English conversation skills and class discussion participation followed closely, with means of 4.23 and 4.14, respectively. However, the lowest mean score was for writing papers (4.07), suggesting that while participants felt generally confident, academic writing posed slightly more difficulty (Appendix 2). The mean score for the total group was 16.8 (SD 2.55) out of 20.

Acculturative Stress Scale in International Students (ASSIS) (N=256)

The ASSIS measures acculturative stress in students, focusing on the following: homesickness, perceived hate/rejection, perceived discrimination, fear and insecurity, and stress from cultural adjustment. Students experienced moderate levels of homesickness, notably missing their home country and relatives. They also experienced moderate feelings of rejection and hate from others, with mean scores ranging from 2.5 to 2.87. They also expressed moderate concern about discriminatory actions, including unfair or biased treatment. They reported feeling moderately fearful or insecure because of cultural differences. They also faced challenges in cultural adaptation, such as accommodations, documentation, and pressures after migration. They felt less intense guilt about leaving their family and adapting to a new lifestyle.

Other emotional concerns included worry about the future, sadness over their people's problems, and a sense of cultural misunderstanding (Appendix 3). On the basis of the calculated subsection means, the subsection with the highest mean score is Fear (3.07). These findings indicate that international students in this sample perceived the highest level of stress related to their safety and security because of their cultural background and generally felt insecure. Subsections that showed significant challenges close to 'Fear' were Homesickness (2.96), Stress Owing to Change/Culture Shock (2.95), Miscellaneous (Other Significant Factors) (2.91) and Perceptions Regarding Discrimination (2.88). These categories also represent substantial areas of acculturative stress for international students. The subsection with the lowest mean score is Perceptions in Respect of Guilt (2.47), suggesting that feelings of guilt about leaving family/friends or living a different lifestyle were, on average, less pronounced sources of stress for this group than for the other groups (Appendix 3).

The statistical associations between the SRFE scale and demographic statistics were determined using the chi-square test. To assess the strength of the association between the variables, an analysis was conducted. The statistical significance between SRFE and the degree of education pursued was identified as $X^2(48) = 65.78$, $p = 0.001$, significant at $p < 0.05$. The results of Cramer's V (ϕ_c) of 0.289 and Phi of 0.579 revealed that the strength of the association between these two variables was "moderately strong" and that there was no significant association between SRFE and age ($X^2(48) = 50.46$, $p = 0.376$), nor was there a

significant association between SRFE and sex ($X^2(12) = 11.32, p = 0.502$). The statistical association between SRFE and key demographic variables indicated that SRFE was not significantly associated with age or sex, as both variables had p values greater than 0.05. However, a statistically significant association was found between SRFE and the level of educational degree pursued ($\chi^2 = 85.78, p = .001$), suggesting that English fluency tends to vary with educational attainment.

Notably, compared with those in diploma or honors programmes, respondents pursuing doctoral and bachelor's degrees reported higher fluency scores. The statistical association between the ASSIS scale and the relevant demographic statistics was determined using the chi-square test. Furthermore, the Phi and Cramer's V test was conducted to determine the association—and its level of significance—between the respective variables. The relationship between ASSIS scores and sex showed that males ($n=138$) had a mean ASSIS score of 108.36 ($SD=23.77$), whereas females ($n=118$) had a mean ASSIS score of 109.14 ($SD=24.90$). A t test was performed to compare the means, resulting in a t value of -0.258 with 254 degrees of freedom. The p value (Sig.) is 0.797, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference between the ASSIS scores of males and females. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means ranged from -6.729 to 5.168 , further supporting the lack of a significant difference between the sexes.

Pearson's rho correlation analysis, which is designed for analyzing correlations based on ranked data, was computed to assess the relationship between the level of acculturative stress (predictor) and the level of self-reported English proficiency (criterion). The results indicated that there was a mildly significant negative correlation between the total score for self-reported English proficiency and acculturative stress ($r = -0.221, N=256$; (two-tailed) p value = 0.00, $p < .05$), with high levels of self-reported English proficiency associated with low levels of acculturative stress. The coefficient of determination, $r^2 = 0.0488$, revealed that self-reported English proficiency explained nearly five percent (5%) of the variance in the respondents' acculturative stress scores. There was no significant difference in the levels of association between the level of social connectedness and age ($X^2(208) = 229.87, p = 0.143$), sex ($X^2(52) = 56.14, p = 0.323$), or educational degree pursued ($X^2(208) = 211.45, p = 0.420$).

DISCUSSION

Self-reported English fluency

In this study, participants reported relatively high levels of English fluency, with average scores. However, the two lowest mean scores were related to specific academic tasks: writing academic papers ($M = 4.07, SD = 0.81$) and participating in class discussions ($M = 4.14, SD = 2.55$).

These findings align with recent evidence indicating that English proficiency and social connectedness remain strong predictors of acculturative stress among diverse student populations (Yeh & Inose, 2025). Earlier studies highlighted language-related challenges such as engaging in class discussions and writing research theses as key barriers (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Jindal-Snape &

Rienties, 2016). This research suggests that managing multiple transitions, such as adapting to a new language, is crucial for international students' academic success. To address this gap, preintegration language and communication training is recommended, as it can increase students' confidence, educational engagement, and overall success (Wilczewski, 2023).

Although not explored in this study, published studies emphasize that international students' proficiency in both academic and social English significantly influences their learning processes, critical thinking, and overall academic performance. When lecturers babble or use idioms and slang, international students—particularly those from non-English-speaking countries such as Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia—struggle to comprehend the material. In these countries, English is often considered a secondary language, which further complicates academic integration (Bo, Fu, & Lim, 2023; Wang, Schultz, & Huang, 2023).

This language barrier can confuse course structures and expectations, negatively affect students' confidence and contribute to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and, in some cases, depression. Quantitative findings from this study revealed a mild but significant negative correlation between self-reported English proficiency and acculturative stress ($r = -0.221$; $N=256$; $p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that higher English proficiency is associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.0488$) suggested that English proficiency accounts for approximately 5% of the variance in acculturative stress scores. Similarly, another study revealed that students who were more confident in their English communication experienced lower levels of acculturative stress. The authors emphasized that the effective use of acculturative strategies is closely linked to confidence in language skills, which, in turn, promotes successful assimilation and academic integration. Moreover, higher proficiency in English allows students to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to a new environment. Therefore, ensuring adequate English-language proficiency before studying abroad could not only increase academic success but also improve social interactions with members of the host community, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and stress (Lashari et al., 2023; Yan, 2024).

Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress refers to the psychological strain experienced because of navigating the process of acculturation—a phenomenon involving both cultural and psychological changes that occur when individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds come into contact (Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024; Bekteshi, 2024). The components of acculturative stress that were investigated in this study included perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived hatred/rejection, fear, culture shock, guilt, and nonspecific concern (Karyanta, Suryanto, & Matulesky, 2024). The results for each dimension are discussed below.

Perceived Discrimination

A significant portion of the participants (mean = 33.95, SD = 14.01) reported feeling discriminated against, with the highest mean scores recorded for feeling denied opportunities ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.27$), experiencing mistreatment in social situations ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.11$) and feeling angry when perceived as inferior ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.25$). These findings align with prior studies indicating that discrimination—both verbal and physical—faced by international students often reflects the host society's shortcomings rather than the students' failure to adapt (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Zheng, 2023). Discrimination among international students restricted certain activities, including leisure travel, because of safety concerns and perceived hostility from locals (Tewari et al., 2024).

Cultural Shock and Stress Due to Changes

A mean score of 26.41 ($SD = 10.75$) was recorded for stress resulting from adjusting to life in a new country. Many participants reported difficulty adapting to the cultural environment, often leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and disoriented—a condition commonly referred to as “acculturation shock.” The specific challenges that the participants highlighted included difficulty acquiring necessary documentation to study or work ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.37$) and feeling overwhelmed by multiple pressures postmigration ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.19$). The participants also described challenges integrating into local culture. They noted a lack of social warmth, feelings of exclusion, and discomfort with public behaviors—such as smoking and displays of affection—that clashed with their values. Students from conservative backgrounds found the cultural shift distressing. Despite these challenges, they expressed a desire to adapt without compromising their cultural identity (Agbeniga, 2016).

Perceptions of Guilt

Although guilt was not viewed as a significant negative influence, some participants reported feelings of guilt ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.24$). These feelings stemmed primarily from adapting to a different lifestyle in South Africa ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.02$) and from leaving behind family and friends ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.22$). For many, adjusting to the host culture felt like a betrayal of their native values. This created a “double bind,” where students were caught between maintaining their cultural heritage and adapting to new societal norms. Such conflict can hinder full cultural integration (Popescu & Pudelko, 2024).

Perceived Hatred and Rejection

The aggregated mean score for perceived hatred and rejection was 13.71 ($SD = 5.87$). The highest-scoring items related to the perceptions of sarcasm or mockery toward their cultural values ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.17$) and nonverbal expressions of rejection from individuals of other ethnic groups ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.21$). Despite South Africa's appeal to thousands of international students annually, xenophobia remains a serious concern. Research shows mixed findings. While some studies have reported minimal xenophobic attitudes among university communities (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2024; Akande, Musarurwa, & Kaye, 2019),

others in Limpopo and the Western Cape have reported high levels of xenophobia and discriminatory behavior (Akande, Musarurwa, & Kaye, 2019; Olofinbiyi, 2022). These varied findings highlight the influence of regional, demographic, and institutional factors on xenophobic attitudes. Addressing this issue requires a stronger body of literature and institutional action, especially since experiences of xenophobia can lead to psychological consequences such as depression (Williams, Osman, & Hyon, 2023). Fostering connections between international and local students may also help reduce feelings of rejection and improve students' overall well-being (Karlan, Knight, & Udry, 2012).

Fear: The mean aggregated score of perceptions of fear among international students was reported as 9.22, with a standard deviation of 3.65. Crime in South Africa continues to be reported as a serious social issue that affects all citizens—either directly or indirectly—including university students (Mkhize, Cinini, & Ngcece, 2022). Unarmed students are particularly vulnerable. Additionally, experiences of xenophobia among students are not uniform; they vary across provinces and are shaped by various factors, such as the nature of the study, the students' immigration status, demographic background, and geographical location. Therefore, there is a pressing need to develop a robust body of literature on this subject. One compelling reason to support such an initiative is the growing evidence that individuals who face challenges such as xenophobia are particularly vulnerable to depression. This link has been affirmed by Hunt et al. (2024). This study also confirmed the findings of focus group discussions with international students, where they voiced their dissatisfaction with racism and discrimination (Hunt et al., 2024; Pryce-Miller et al., 2023).

International students often feel that they are treated or perceived differently by South Africans. As a result of these experiences, many express a strong desire to leave the country immediately after completing their studies. International students can develop friendships with other local students to overcome the problems related to the perceived hate they encounter in the institutions in which they are enrolled (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Kristiana, 2022). Higher education institutions such as the UWC could provide important emotional support mechanisms and, through specific programs designed for international students, show empathy and affection toward them (Udry, 2012). Motivational support could be provided by way of encouragement and informational support and the provision of helpful advice and information through the media of supervisors or academic advisers.

Homesickness: The aggregate mean score for this item, namely, the perception of homesickness among participants, was 8.87, with a standard deviation of 3.65. The mean score for the feeling of homesickness in longing to be back in their country (3.30, SD = 1.20) was higher than that for having left relatives behind (3.09, SD = 1.28). Leaving family, friends, and a home culture in pursuit of studies abroad, international students frequently find themselves grieving for the people and places they have left behind. Building new social networks and adjusting to new cultural demands are challenging tasks. Past research has also shown that

homesickness is a matter of significant concern to international students (Alasmari, 2023; Raja, 2023). Several studies highlight the fact that international students attribute their feelings of loneliness to their having left relatives, friends and family members in their countries of origin when they migrate to a foreign country to pursue their higher education (Wallen, Sagan, & Scally Robertson, 2024; Ajibade & Mwalillanda, 2024). International students at UWC share their perceptions of homesickness, especially the sense of missing their families, friends, and home culture.

Social Connectedness: Social connectedness is a significant predictor of adjustment (Yıldırım, Geçer, & Bağcı, 2024). This finding concurs with the findings that defined social connectedness as “the subjective awareness of being in close relation with the social world.” With an aggregate mean score of 68.35 and a standard deviation of 18.76, the participants in this study perceived that their connections with their peers in UWC were average. The lowest mean score reported (3.05, SD = 1.16) was applied to participants who did not relate well to most people and who had a general feeling of being outsiders. There were, however, some students who reported feeling comfortable in the presence of strangers. This finding is in agreement with findings that individuals with a low level of connectivity may perceive their environment as negative and cold. Moreover, people high in connectedness might see it as welcoming and positive. Predictions were made concerning the fact that students with higher levels of social connectedness have more time in their new social environment and experience lower levels of adjustment difficulties (Winstone et al., 2021). In terms of one's social environment, low social connectedness may be associated with social stigma, causing these individuals to be perceived as being lonely. Connectedness may also be related to the way international students view their social situation, including friends, roommates, and people in general. Overall, problems with social connectedness indicate a more persistent global inability to connect with the social world (Langenkamp & Schobin, 2024).

Social connectedness was found to be a predictor of acculturative stress among international students. Recent work highlights that social support significantly moderates acculturative stress and anxiety among international students (Ersoy & Akçaoğlu, 2025). Social connectedness can affect one's emotions, cognitions, and perceptions and therefore one's actions about one's social world. For example, individuals with high levels of social connectedness can easily participate in social activities; on the other hand, individuals with low levels of social connectedness may not be able to effectively manage their needs and emotions, which may then lead to lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of acculturative stress (Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024; Nguyen & Le, 2019). These findings are consistent with recent research in the *Journal of International Students*, which demonstrates that strong social networks and a sense of belonging significantly reduce acculturative stress and improve academic adjustment among international students (Wallen et al., 2024; Glass & Westmont, 2022). Similarly, Kim and Kim (2023) reported that institutional support and peer engagement play critical roles in facilitating positive adaptation outcomes. As a result, it was

predicted that students with higher levels of social connectedness generally have more time in their new social environment and tend to experience lower levels of adjustment difficulties.

Miscellaneous (other significant factors): Other essential factors indicated by those international students earning the two highest mean scores are related to their feelings of hurt, especially when people do not understand their cultural value system (3.08; SD = 1.11) and their uncertainty about the future—whether to stay in South Africa or to return to their home country (3.02; SD = 1.99). In previous studies, several factors contributed to the acculturative concerns of international students, namely, a lack of a sense of belonging to the host community and worries about what to do after completing their studies—whether to return to the home country or to stay in South Africa (Ajibade, 2024; Ma, Sakamoto, & Park, 2020). This was apparent in the discussion with the international students at UWC, who shared their feelings of uncertainty, especially in their decision-making as to whether to stay behind or leave after their studies. International students also reported challenges in terms of cultural integration, as they had to face and accept the differences between their own culture and that of the host country. Furthermore, they sometimes face challenges when they enter a new environment (Sonn et al., 2021).

In facing challenges and in terms of the dynamics of human nature, international students struggle to establish an internal balance within themselves by acquiring new cultural communication practices, actively participating in their interpersonal and intercultural space, developing an astute sense of environmental awareness, engaging in the mass communication processes of the local community, and gaining competency in the host communication system (Luo & Liu, 2023). The struggle for internal balance or stability leads all individuals to undergo a transformation process known as cross-cultural adaptation (Shafaei & Razak, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Recent scholarship, particularly from the *Journal of International Students*, underscores the importance of structured social support and inclusive institutional practices in mitigating acculturative stress and enhancing student belonging (Wallen et al., 2024; Glass & Westmont, 2022). This study explored the relationships between acculturative stress, social connectedness, and self-reported English fluency among international students at UWC. While participants generally reported sufficient English proficiency, especially in terms of comprehension and conversation, challenges remained in writing and class engagement, which were more pronounced at lower academic levels. A mild but significant negative correlation was observed between English fluency and acculturative stress, underscoring the importance of language skills in student adjustment. Social connectedness emerged as a strong buffer against acculturative stress, suggesting that students with deeper interpersonal ties face fewer psychological challenges. However, many still experienced moderate levels of

stress, with perceived discrimination, cultural shock, and fear being common stressors. These findings highlight the urgent need for institutions to adopt more inclusive, supportive practices such as language support, peer engagement programs and orientation services to improve the academic and emotional well-being of international students.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study was approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the UWC and adhered to the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki. All the participants provided informed consent before data collection.

Consent for Publication: Consent was granted by the authors.

Availability of data and materials: The datasets generated during the current study are available upon request.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work. It was self-funded by the author.

Author Contributions: Arowoia Ayorinde conceptualized and designed the study. A, OO, AR, and J.P. conducted the literature review and data curation. All the authors contributed to the first draft and revised crucial intellectual content. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgments: Our deepest gratitude goes to all the students who participated as participants in this study. I can clarify that the interview guide & questionnaire used in this study were developed for this study. This primary study was conducted in partial fulfillment of Dr Ayorinde Solademi's PhD studies (<https://uwcscholar.uwc.ac.za/items/1d12bcc6-c6cd-40d1-9277-f0cafd697318>).

AI Usage: In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.

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Appendix 1- Study Sample Characteristics (N=256)

Variable	Category	N	Percentage (100%)
Gender	Female	118	46.1%
	Male	138	53.9%
Age Groups	≥ 19	9	3.5%
	20-39	94	36.7%
	40-49	87	34.0%
	50-59	48	18.8%
	60 ≤	18	7.0%
Marital Status	Never Married	137	53.5%
	Married/Domestic Partner	112	43.8%
	Separated/Divorced	7	2.7%
	Widowed	0	0%
Living Arrangement While Studying	Living alone	189	73.8%
	Living with a Partner/Spouse	67	26.2%
Educational Degree Pursued	Diploma	3	1.2%
	Bachelor	51	19.9%
	Honors	30	11.7%
	Masters	94	36.7%
	Doctorate	78	30.5%
Home Continent	Asia	4	1.6%
	Africa	246	96.1%
	North America	5	2.0%
	Europe	1	0.4%
Native Language	English	73	28.5%
	Others	183	71.5%
Faculty Registered	Community and Health Sciences	73	28.5%
	Economic and Management Sciences	51	19.9%
	Natural Sciences	63	24.6%
	Dentistry	10	3.9%
	Arts	20	7.8%
	Law	20	7.8%
	Education	19	7.4%
Major Source of Financial Support	Scholarship/Funding	93	36.7%
	Parents/Family	63	24.6%
	Personal earnings and savings	76	29.7%
	Loan	8	3.1%
	Others	15	5.9%

Appendix 2: The Self-reported Fluency of English (N=256)

Items	Min	Max	Mean (X)	SD
1. Please rate your ability to understand your professors in your classes.	1	5	4.35	0.67
2. Please rate your ability to participate in class discussions.	1	5	4.14	0.77
3. Please rate your English conversation skills.	1	5	4.23	0.76
4. Please rate your ability to write papers.	1	5	4.07	0.81
Total	4	20	16.8	2.55

Appendix 3: Acculturative Stress Scale in International Students (ASSIS) (N=256)

Items	Min	Max	Mean (X)	SD
Homesickness (Subsection Mean: 2.96)				
1. Homesickness for my country bothers me.	1.0	5.0	3.3	1.2
2. I feel sad living in unfamiliar surroundings here.	1.0	5.0	2.48	1.17
3. I feel sad leaving my relatives behind.	1.0	5.0	3.09	1.28
Perceived hate/rejection				
4. I feel rejected when people are sarcastic regarding my cultural values.	1.0	5.0	2.87	1.21
5. People from some ethnic groups show hatred toward me nonverbally.	1.0	5.0	2.87	1.19
6. I feel rejected when others do not appreciate my cultural values.	1.0	5.0	2.66	1.14
7. People from some other ethnic groups show hatred toward me through their actions.	1.0	5.0	2.81	1.17
8. People from some other ethnic groups show hatred toward me verbally.	1.0	5.0	2.5	1.11
Perceptions regarding discrimination (Subsection Mean: 2.88)				
9. I am treated differently in social situations.	1.0	5.0	3.2	1.11

10. Others are biased against me.	1.0	5.0	2.75	1.14
11. Many opportunities are denied to me.	1.0	5.0	3.28	1.27
12. I feel angry that my people are considered inferior here.	1.0	5.0	3.04	1.25
13. I feel that I receive unfair treatment.	1.0	5.0	3.0	1.22
14. I am denied what I deserve.	1.0	5.0	2.73	1.18
15. I feel inferior because of my cultural background.	1.0	5.0	2.07	0.99
16. I feel that my people are discriminated against.	1.0	5.0	3.0	1.23
17. My status in this society is low on account of my cultural background.	1.0	5.0	2.58	1.13
18. I am treated differently because of my race.	1.0	5.0	2.79	1.19
19. I am treated differently because of my color.	1.0	5.0	2.8	1.19
20. I feel that some people do not associate with me because of my ethnicity.	1.0	5.0	2.71	1.11
Fear (Subsection Mean: 3.07)				
21. I fear for my safety because my cultural background is different.	1.0	5.0	3.24	1.21
22. I feel insecure here.	1.0	5.0	3.16	1.22
23. I generally keep a low profile owing to a fear of other ethnic groups.	1.0	5.0	2.82	1.22
Stress owing to change/Culture shock (Subsection Mean: 2.95)				
24. I feel comfortable adjusting to new foods and/or to new eating habits.	1.0	5.0	3.46	1.11
25. I struggle to select groceries, clothing, and other supplies that suit me.	1.0	5.0	2.25	1.14
26. I find essential supplies to be costly and am unsure on how to obtain them at a lower price.	1.0	5.0	2.93	1.15
27. I have difficulty finding suitable accommodation for myself.	1.0	5.0	3.19	1.31
28. I feel overwhelmed by the multiple pressures placed upon me after I migrated to this society.	1.0	5.0	3.22	1.19
29. I have difficulty adjusting my appearance to the new lifestyle.	1.0	5.0	2.56	1.11
30. I have difficulty in obtaining the necessary documents to allow me to work or study.	1.0	5.0	3.32	1.37
31. I am finding it hard to establish a home in this new setup.	1.0	5.0	3.02	1.23

32. I find it difficult to know what to do and where to go when I am ill.	1.0	5.0	2.46	1.14
Perceptions in respect of guilt (Subsection Mean: 2.47)				
33. I feel guilty about leaving my family and friends behind.	1.0	5.0	2.61	1.22
34. I feel guilty about living a different lifestyle here.	1.0	5.0	2.32	1.02
Miscellaneous (Other significant factors) (Subsection Mean: 2.93)				
35. I feel intimidated about participating in social activities.	1.0	5.0	2.57	1.16
36. It hurts when people do not understand my cultural values.	1.0	5.0	3.08	1.11
37. I feel sad when I think about my people's problems.	1.0	5.0	2.96	1.14
38. I worry about my future, in respect of not being able to decide whether to stay here or to go back home.	1.0	5.0	3.02	1.39

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