

Mental Health Perceptions and Help-Seeking Behaviors among International Students in UK Universities: A Qualitative Literature Review

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Abstract: This literature review examines the mental health and help-seeking behaviors of international students in the UK universities. The study explores the dynamic interplay of cultural, institutional, and individual factors that shape students' psychological well-being and the support systems. Based on the qualitative studies, the literature review reviews that students from collectivist cultures, such as those of African, Caribbean, and Chinese heritage, often navigate stigmatization of mental health and prefer coping mechanisms, such as peer or family support, rather than professional counselling. Barriers hindering help-seeking behaviors include limited awareness of counselling services, language difficulties, and cultural misalignment. Consequently, international students underutilized the mental health support systems of UK universities and lacked culturally attuned engagement strategies. Peer-arrival orientation and peer network are effective interventions to improve well-being and adaptation. The literature reviews advocate accessible and culturally sensitive mental health strategies within UK universities. Longitudinal qualitative research is recommended to trace the coping mechanisms across students' academic journeys. Through those endeavors, higher education institutions can enhance the academic success and well-being of the diversified international community.

Keywords: Mental health; Help-seeking behavior; UK international students; Cultural adaptation; Academic pressure

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1. Introduction

International students in the United Kingdom (UK) universities experience unique challenges, including cultural adaptation, academic pressure, and social isolation. These experiences affect their mental health substantially, thus influencing their perceptions and help-seeking behaviors^[1]. This literature review explores the experiences of perceptions and help-seeking behaviors regarding mental health among international students in UK universities. The importance of this topic lies in the ever-diversifying UK higher education population, which means that international students experience stressful conditions, such as cultural transition and loneliness,

that threaten their mental health. The qualitative method in this review provides the human angle regarding international students. The research goals are to examine the factors influencing mental health perceptions and the factors that hinder persons with mental health problems from seeking help. Managing mental health issues for this group enhances their academic success, well-being, and overall university experience. Thus, addressing mental health barriers for international students in UK universities requires culturally tailored interventions.

2. Cultural factors and mental health

There are significant differences in stigma, awareness, and understanding across diverse student groups. Clough et al. compare mental health literacy and attitudes between domestic and international tertiary students based on the features of convenience samples ^[2]. This research design, which uses surveys and focus groups, provides a good mix of quantitative and qualitative data. However, it broadly groups international students, making it hard to compare and contrast effectively between people within the same category. Contrastingly, Dare et al. focus on African and Caribbean students, providing a nuanced understanding of how socio-cultural factors shape mental illness conceptualization ^[1]. Dare et al. posit that cultural differences significantly shape perceptions of mental health, with stigma more pronounced among students from collectivist cultures compared to those from individualist backgrounds who often demonstrate higher awareness ^[1]. However, McGettrick bridges perspectives by examining stigma and help-seeking differences between US and UK students ^[3]. Their comparative strategy analyses the role of the national and cultural contexts very well, but does not elucidate intersectionality, like ethnicity.

3. Barriers to help-seeking

Research on barriers to mental health help-seeking highlights challenges such as stigma, language, and limited awareness. Barrow and Thomas conducted a systematic literature review of adolescent mental health and discovered that stigma and lack of service knowledge were the main barriers ^[4]. The study's strengths include a methodologically sound approach. However, their emphasis on adolescents may undermine applicability to university populations. Conversely, Bryant et al. focus on higher education contexts, examining help-seeking behaviors among university students. The authors noted that inadequate knowledge about available services and financial constraints hindered help-seeking, particularly among lower-income students, highlighting systemic inequities in access. However, Burns et al. identified an intensified stigma and isolation barrier due to the COVID-19 pandemic ^[5]. This combined methodology contributes significantly to the study, including numerical patterns and sophisticated descriptions.

4. Role of universities

The role of UK universities in mental health support is pivotal, particularly for diverse international student populations. Broglia et al. examined student mental health characteristics as well as self-identified depression and help-seeking behavior in terms of temporal patterns and service use ^[6]. A major methodological strength of the study is the longitudinal nature of service use data, which has the potential to provide trends. In contrast, Hardy et al. explore mental health help-seeking among racially minoritized students using a systematic review and thematic synthesis ^[7]. Broglia et al. found university counselling services effective in improving mental

health but underutilized, while Hardy et al. emphasized peer networks' role in fostering cultural adaptation ^[6-7]. In a similar study, Stone analyzes the help-seeking behaviors of students in the UK using the lens of the Health Belief Model ^[8]. The study considers perceived susceptibility as a reason for seeking counselling.

5. Coping mechanisms

International students employ varied coping mechanisms to navigate mental health challenges, reflecting cultural and individual differences. Law focuses on Chinese international students in the UK and highlights how social support, peers, and social communication could help limit poor mental health ^[9]. The findings highlight the importance of cultural identity in shaping coping strategies, offering universities direction for culturally tailored interventions. In contrast, Tung examines acculturative stress across diverse international student groups, identifying problem-focused strategies like goal-setting and time management ^[10]. Mindfulness and self-care are the pivotal strategies that Waters finds with Chinese students, focusing on concerns marked by Law ^[11]. Thus, Waters' conclusions are consistent with Law, but the study uses a wider range of theoretical paradigms, such as psychological resilience ^[11]. Nevertheless, its reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, echoing limitations in qualitative methodologies.

6. Qualitative research findings

Exploring international students' mental health and help-seeking behaviors, highlighting the interplay of cultural, institutional, and individual factors. For example, cultural background plays a significant role in how mental health is viewed and generalized ^[1]. Similarly, Law and Waters identify how Chinese students prioritize familial and peer support, often over formal counselling, reflecting cultural preferences for informal coping mechanisms ^[9, 11]. Barriers to help-seeking include language difficulties, stigma, and limited awareness of services ^[4, 12]. Students also lack culturally competent services, which negates the institution's support ^[7]. Some students reported using mindfulness, peer support, or problem-focused ways of managing acculturative stress ^[9-10]. Overall, these studies emphasize the need for culturally sensitive interventions and stronger institutional support systems.

7. Methodology

The study undertook a comprehensive search using academic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and university library resources. Keywords used were "international students", "mental health", "help-seeking behavior", "qualitative study", and "UK universities" to tune the search to suited articles. The search focused on studies published in peer-reviewed journals and academic books, emphasizing qualitative methodologies.

Studies included in this review focused on international students in the UK, specifically addressing mental health perceptions, help-seeking behaviors, and coping strategies. This review included only qualitative research with interviews, focus groups, or thematic analyses. Recent research works from the last decade were mostly included to reduce the possibility of any generality in the conclusion. Excluded studies did not specifically involve international students, use quantitative methodologies, or focus on mental health outside the UK context.

The literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. This analysis entailed grouping major

topics highlighted in the studies, such as cultural factors, facilitators, and barriers to seeking help. Applying thematic synthesis, it was possible to have a fine-grained analysis of how the experiences of mental health in international students may be either similar or different, as well as what factors influence their decision to seek help. This approach ensured a comprehensive and systematic review of qualitative findings across the studies.

8. Discussion

The reviewed literature reveals several key findings about international students' mental health and help-seeking behaviors in UK universities. A prominent theme is the influence of cultural factors on mental health perceptions. Dare et al. and Law have shown that the way students from African, Caribbean, and Chinese backgrounds perceive mental health issues and the decision whether to seek professional assistance is influenced by cultural factors^[1,9]. The study consistently identified barriers such as language difficulties, lack of awareness about available services, and financial constraints.

Universities can address these challenges by offering culturally sensitive support, considering diverse student backgrounds. Hardy et al. pointed out peer support networks as a strategy for minimising stigma and boosting help-seeking behaviors^[7]. Also, including the staff from the university in mental health training in terms of cultural competency can enhance mental health for all learners^[6]. However, there are still some important research limitations in the literature. Here, students from less numerous international groups are not widely studied, and differences between regions in the UK are considered insufficiently investigated. Much research is still needed to identify the best universities to host culturally sensitive mental health assistance. Further qualitative research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess how coping strategies evolve for international students.

The reviewed studies reveal several nuanced factors influencing mental health among international students beyond stigma, cultural barriers, and institutional support. For instance, trends extend to the impact of acculturation stressors, language competence, and personal coping, with differences collectively noted in terms of demographic differences and regional differences. Based on the discussion with Tung, the area of acculturative stress is deemed a major factor influencing international students' mental health, especially focusing on cultural and psychological factors^[10]. Similarly, Law discusses the difficulty of cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese individuals, citing language and discrimination as predictors for increased stress among international students^[9]. These findings align with Waters, who underscores that cultural familiarity and preparatory support significantly mitigate these stressors, suggesting the importance of pre-arrival orientation programs^[11].

Broglia et al. and Stone collectively emphasize language proficiency as both a barrier to accessing services and a determinant of interpersonal connections^[6,8]. While Stone describes how restricted English proficiency discourages help-seeking via the Health Belief Model, Hardy et al. proposed that multilingual peers' support groups are inclusive, which can be shown as the opposite of responding to the absence of the gap^[7-8]. Such a gap points to the notion that the institutional focus on linguistic diversity requires uniqueness. Like Law and Waters, the sources that focus on Chinese students' coping, there are similar results on positive approaches to familial support and community networks for Chinese students^[9,11]. However, there are different perspectives from Tung^[10]. Tung describes specific tactics endured or used to protect the individual, including independence, as reported by students of Western acculturation. This divergence underscores the interplay of cultural

upbringing in shaping coping behaviors, demanding flexible interventions recognizing collectivist versus individualist tendencies.

The role of universities, explored by Hardy et al., is complemented by Bryant et al., who identify low visibility of mental health services as a persistent barrier^[7, 12]. While Hardy et al. encourage expansions through peer groups, and Bryant et al. observe the need for constant service promotion^[7, 12]. This finding reveals the issue of greater visibility of services but less effective reach, suggesting future areas of synergy between service visibility and service accessibility. The studies also indicate the problems of geographic representation. However, Dare et al. also stress the lack of representation of students of African and Caribbean origin in the explored works and the need for a more diverse sample^[1]. These studies collectively stress the interplay of individual, cultural, and institutional factors, calling for holistic, culturally sensitive, and accessible mental health frameworks for international students.

9. Conclusion

This literature review highlights the significant mental health challenges international students in UK universities experience, shaped largely by cultural factors, stigma, and barriers to help-seeking. As evidenced in the reviewed research articles, international students, especially students of color, are at an increased risk of missing signs of mental health problems or seeking the right assistance. The thematic cross-analysis revealed that language barriers, culture-related stigma, and unawareness of the potential services were named across the studies. Peer support networks and culturally competent mental health services were identified as essential strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Based on these findings, UK universities should prioritize establishing culturally considerate mental health services, including language support and awareness campaigns that address stigma and promote help-seeking. Hardy et al. and Bryant et al. recommend that educational sessions be provided for the university staff regarding the appropriate approach toward the needs of international students^[7, 12]. Additionally, Dare et al., Law, and Waters recommend that universities should include more peer support outreach programs and promote students' autonomy in increasing inclusiveness^[1, 9, 11]. Longitudinal studies would also provide insights into how students' coping strategies evolve, helping universities refine their support systems.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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