

“As if I don’t belong here.” First-Year Experiences of International Nursing Students at University – A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: The rapid adaptation of international nursing students to university life enables them to actively continue their education without disruption in the following years. Identifying the challenges faced by these students, who are future nursing professionals, is essential for their adaptation and professional development.

Aim: This study aimed to explore the perspectives of international nursing students regarding their first-year experiences at university.

Methods: This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) was used for reporting. The sample consisted of 13 international nursing students enrolled in the Faculty of Nursing at a university. Data were collected through face-to-face, individual, in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview questions. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: The mean age of the nursing students was 23.3 years. Among the participants, seven were women, 11 had been residing in Türkiye for approximately one year, 12 were from Iran, and one was from Iraq. Three key themes emerged in this study: Facilitators of Adaptation, Challenges, and Coping. The students identified several facilitators of adaptation, including similarities between the Turkish economy and culture and their home countries' economies and cultures, proficiency in the Turkish language, studying at a nursing school aligned with their career goals, and receiving social support from their relatives. However, they also faced challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, social isolation, homesickness, and academic and clinical difficulties.

Conclusion: International nursing students may encounter language barriers, cultural differences, and education-specific challenges during their first year of nursing school. In this context, developing support mechanisms to guide these students in their academic and social lives will facilitate their ability to cope with these difficulties.

Keywords: Experience, immigrant, immigration, international student, nursing

Gülsüm Zekiye Tuncer¹ ,
Metin Tuncer² 

¹Department of Psychiatric Nursing, Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Nursing, İzmir, Türkiye

²Department of Nursing Fundamentals, Gümüşhane University, Gümüşhane, Türkiye

Introduction

The internationalization of education in higher education is a result of globalization and societal change.^{1,2} The widespread adoption of harmonized education and training programs has led to the alignment of university systems at the international level, thereby increasing international student mobility in many countries.² International student mobility and its implications for labor market outcomes are shaped by factors such as educational attainment, the type of mobility, and the influence of international prestige hierarchies.³ University students also benefit from this international mobility. However, factors such as varying living conditions across countries, periodic challenges in different regions, and growing concerns and expectations regarding economic conditions affect international mobility.⁴ Furthermore, access to educational opportunities and the desire to obtain a higher quality education contribute to and enhance international student mobility.^{4,5}

Similar to many other countries, Türkiye has shown a growing commitment to increasing its international student population.⁶ To this end, various measures have been implemented to facilitate the admission and integration of international students. Several universities in Türkiye have introduced specific regulations for international student admissions, including the establishment of designated quotas.⁷ Detailed guidelines regarding entrance examinations and application procedures have also been provided

Cite this article as: Tuncer GZ, Tuncer M. “As if I don’t belong here.” First-year experiences of international nursing students at university – A qualitative study. *J Educ Res Nurs*. 2025; 22(1):47-56.

Corresponding author: Gülsüm Zekiye Tuncer
E-mail: gulsum.damlarkaya@deu.edu.tr

Received: July 23, 2024
Accepted: February 18, 2025
Publication Date: March 1, 2025



Copyright@Author(s) - Available online at
www.jer-nursing.org
Content of this journal is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial
4.0 International License.

for prospective international students.⁷ Since 2010, Turkish universities have been admitting international students through the “YÖS” (Yabancı Öğrenci Sınavı or Foreign Student Examination) to improve access to higher education for international students.^{7,8} Recent data indicate that of the 7.5 million undergraduate and associate degree students enrolled in Türkiye’s higher education system during the 2023-2024 academic year, 82,000 are newly registered international students, bringing the total number of international students to over 300,000.⁹ A significant proportion of these students come from socioeconomically and politically fragile countries.¹⁰ Young adulthood, a period already characterized by vulnerability to psychosocial developmental crises, can pose additional challenges for these students, particularly those from fragile backgrounds, as they face academic, social, physical, and psychological pressures.^{11,12} Navigating a new educational system, adapting to a different culture, overcoming language barriers, and managing financial difficulties can complicate their adjustment to university life and hinder their academic success.^{13,14} Consequently, successful adaptation during the first year of study is a critical factor influencing their decision to continue their education, their academic performance, and their overall psychological well-being.^{15,16}

International nursing students, while benefiting from global and cultural transitions, face distinct challenges compared to other university students.¹⁷ Nursing students take on multiple roles throughout their education, including those of a student, team member, and caregiver. As part of a practical discipline, they must develop effective communication skills and fully engage in all educational activities to manage their intensive academic workload. For international nursing students, the need to adapt to new medical terminology and communication styles, combined with language barriers, can be overwhelming, leading to increased stress and reduced academic engagement.^{18,19} Addressing these challenges through strategies such as language support, psychological assistance, and cultural adaptation is essential to mitigating feelings of alienation and confusion in unfamiliar environments, which should be a priority in nursing education.^{20,21} Facilitating their adaptation to university life will enable international nursing students to actively participate in the demanding theoretical and clinical components of their education in subsequent years.^{21,22} Reports indicate that international nursing students in Türkiye face challenges beyond language, cultural, and religious differences, including health issues, communication difficulties, housing problems, homesickness, and struggles in adapting to new circumstances.^{12,23,24} Despite increasing quotas for international nursing students, initiatives aimed at addressing these barriers to adaptation are perceived as insufficient, likely due to a limited understanding of the specific challenges faced during their first year.^{19,20}

Studies examining the experiences of international students in nursing schools in Türkiye exist in the literature.¹⁶⁻²² However, these studies generally focus on overall experiences and do not specifically address the unique challenges faced by students who must learn Turkish during their first year of nursing school. The first year of nursing education is inherently stressful due to its demanding theoretical courses, clinical practices, and patient communication requirements. When this stress is compounded by language barriers, cultural differences, and the difficulty of adapting to a new environment, the first year becomes even more challenging for international nursing students.²⁰ Language barriers, in particular, may lead to difficulties in

keeping up with the intensive theoretical and practical coursework.¹⁸ Additionally, cultural differences and communication challenges can create problems in critical areas such as patient care and teamwork during clinical practice.²² Students who struggle to overcome the challenges of their first year in nursing school may be at risk of academic failure, feelings of alienation, and ultimately leaving the country.²⁵ Identifying the specific difficulties encountered during the first year can help guide the development of supportive programs such as orientation sessions, language support initiatives, peer mentoring, and psychological counseling services for international students. These programs can facilitate successful adaptation to nursing education and enable international students to reach their full potential. This study aims to fill a significant gap in the literature by providing an in-depth examination of the academic, social, and psychological challenges faced by international students who are required to learn Turkish during their first year of nursing education.

The study seeks to explore the perspectives of international nursing students regarding their first-year university experiences by addressing the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of international nursing students during their first year of university?
- What challenges do international nursing students face during their first year of nursing school?

Materials and Methods

Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative descriptive studies aim to explore and understand a phenomenon, process, or the perspectives and worldviews of individuals involved in the research.²⁶ The descriptive qualitative research design was chosen to achieve the study’s purpose and to thoroughly examine the experiences of international nursing students.²⁷ The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) was utilized to ensure the accurate reporting of this research.²⁸

Participants

The study population consisted of first-year international nursing students enrolled in the Faculty of Nursing at a public university between February 2023 and October 2023. The nursing program at the public university where the study was conducted is taught in Turkish. International students at this university are required to either submit a foreign language exemption certificate or complete their education in the university’s Turkish preparatory program before continuing their studies in their respective faculty. Of the 279 first-year students in the Faculty of Nursing, 37 were admitted under the international nursing student quota. An email invitation was sent to students within this quota, and 15 students volunteered to participate in the study. However, interviews were not conducted with two of these students due to their insufficient proficiency in Turkish listening and speaking skills.

The sample size was determined using the purposive sampling method, a non-probability sampling technique, in accordance with the nature of qualitative research. The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: enrollment in the Faculty of Nursing at a university, being an international student, and being a first-year student. The exclusion criterion for the study was having insufficient Turkish listening

and speaking skills that would prevent participation in the interview. The study was completed with 13 volunteer students who met the inclusion criteria. Data collection continued until the saturation point was reached, meaning that the concepts and processes addressing the research questions began to recur. The saturation point refers to the stage at which these concepts and processes repeatedly emerge.²⁹ During the interviews, data transcription and coding were conducted simultaneously. The saturation point was reached with the 13th participant when similar codes began to emerge, and no further participants were recruited.

Data Collection Tools

Student Information Form

This form included questions on the descriptive characteristics of international nursing students, such as age, sex, duration of stay in Türkiye, place of residence, economic status after migration, country of origin, method of arrival, and intention to return to their home country.^{2,16}

Semi-Structured Interview Form

The Semi-Structured Interview Form was developed by the researchers based on the relevant literature. It consists of interview questions designed to explore the feelings and thoughts of international nursing students regarding their first-year experiences at university.^{6,24} The form includes five core semi-structured interview questions that are clear and easy for participants to understand. Since the form is semi-structured, it includes sub-questions to provide a comprehensive response to the research question. Each participant was asked the following questions individually:

- How would you describe your university life? What are the most challenging aspects of your university life?
- What are the positive and negative experiences you have had during your first year of nursing school?
- What are the most challenging aspects of nursing school for you?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the difficulties you have encountered in your first year of university and nursing school?
- How do you cope with challenging situations in your first year?

Data Collection

Following the purposive sampling method, an announcement was sent via email to all first-year international students enrolled in the Faculty of Nursing. Written and verbal consent regarding their participation in the study was obtained from students who responded to the announcement and met the inclusion criteria. The researcher introduced herself to the volunteer participants and explained the purpose of the study and the research process before conducting the study. The data collection process began with the collection of sociodemographic information from the students who provided consent. Face-to-face interviews were conducted individually, and each session was recorded using a voice recorder with the participant's permission. The students were asked both the main and sub-questions from the Semi-Structured Interview Form. Interviews continued until the saturation point was reached. After all the questions and sub-questions in the form were asked, the voice recorder was turned off, and the interview process was concluded. The interviews lasted an average of 23.57 minutes.

Rigor

In qualitative research, the characteristics of the researchers should be explicitly stated, and their potential influence on the study should be evaluated. In this study, the reliability of the data was ensured by adhering to the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.³⁰ The researchers' experiences, academic backgrounds, and roles were expected to influence the research process. The study was conducted by a female and a male nurse educator, both with strong therapeutic communication skills. To enhance the research process, both researchers had prior experience working with nursing students and had conducted studies on topics such as discrimination and brain drain. These nurse educators have diverse academic backgrounds and statuses. Both researchers have worked extensively with first-year students and possess significant clinical mentoring experience.

The interviews were structured with consideration of the challenges and discrimination experienced by international students. Given the sensitive and complex nature of the topic, all elements of the therapeutic relationship were employed to ensure that international students felt comfortable and could freely express their views and perceptions. The researcher's effective and empathetic communication, conducted without judgment or guidance, fostered trust among participants, aligning with the principle of credibility in qualitative research.

To ensure confirmability, the researcher summarized the data obtained from the interviews to the participants toward the end of each session. Participants were asked if they wished to add anything regarding their experiences, and their confirmation of the data was obtained. For transferability, diversity within the sample was ensured in terms of attributes such as age and gender. Additionally, all processes related to the study were documented in detail. To enhance the study's dependability, all interviews were conducted by the first researcher using a semi-structured interview guide. During the analysis phase, both researchers independently analyzed and interpreted the data. They subsequently discussed and reached a consensus to finalize the findings.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the study data was conducted independently and manually by both researchers. The data were evaluated using content analysis.^{31,32} The interviews were first audio-recorded and uploaded to a computer on the same day, and the data were transcribed verbatim. While transcribing the voice recordings, notes on participants' gestures, tone of voice, and pauses, if any, were added to the transcript alongside the text. Coding analysis was performed in three stages:

- **Open Coding:** This is the first stage of the coding process, in which data pieces were classified. When the researcher identified a concept, event, or idea, it was assigned a label. If the same concept or event was encountered again, the corresponding code was applied. When codes were meaningfully related, they were grouped into categories.
- **Axial Coding:** In this second stage of coding, related codes were grouped around a central meaning, leading to the creation of core categories.
- **Selective Coding:** This is the final stage of the coding process. After completing open and axial coding, the main code representing the

text was identified.³³ The problem characterizing the entire text was determined by reviewing all categories and axial codes. Themes emerged from this coding process.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Before the research process began, ethical approval was obtained from the Dokuz Eylul University Non-interventional Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 7853-GOA, Protocol Number: 2023/05-40, Date: 22.02.2023) and permission was secured from the institution where the study was conducted. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were advised that the interviews would be audio-recorded. Written and verbal consent was then obtained from each participant.

Results

The mean age of the international nursing students was 23.3 years. Among the participants, seven were women. Eleven had been residing in Türkiye for approximately one year, while four had been living in Türkiye for more than one year. Twelve students came from Iran, and one came from Iraq. Seven students arrived in Türkiye after passing the Foreign Student Exam, while eight were accepted based on their diploma score. Two students lived in a dormitory, while 11 stayed in private housing. Three participants perceived their economic status as poor, while 10 described it as moderate. One student planned to return to their home country after graduation, six stated that they did not want to return, and seven reported that they would definitely not return to their hometown (Table 1).

In this study, three key themes emerged regarding the first-year experiences of international nursing students: Facilitators of Adaptation, Challenges, and Coping (Figure 1).

Theme 1. Facilitators of Adaptation

Subtheme 1: Cultural Closeness

Some participants stated that the culture of Türkiye was similar to that of their home countries.

"Turkish culture is similar to my culture, and Türkiye is closer to my country, so I can see my family easily. I also speak the same language. I am Azeri. The language seems easier to me." (P6)

"This place is very close to my home country. It is close to Iran in terms of culture and distance, which influenced my decision." (P7)

Subtheme 2: Economic Adaptation

Participants noted that Türkiye's economic situation was similar to that of their home countries, which facilitated their adaptation to Türkiye.

"Well, it all depends on the economic situation. I think Türkiye's and Iran's economies are similar. The value of our currency is slightly higher compared to the Turkish lira." (P13) *"Actually, I was thinking of going to other countries, but the value of Iran's currency is higher than that of Türkiye's currency ... Thus, Türkiye is more affordable for us. That's why I decided to come here."* (P10)

Subtheme 3: Language Advantage

Participants highlighted that their ability to speak similar dialects of the Turkish language was an advantage in their studies.

"My mom watches Turkish movies a lot. We watched them together. I think even the songs influenced me... Also, my job had an impact. I always talked to children and parents where I worked." (P5)

"Since Azerbaijani is our language, when I was studying in the first semester, it took me twenty minutes to read a page, but now I can finish it in five or ten minutes... It may take even less time in future semesters." (P8)

Subtheme 4: Social Support

Participants stated that they received social support from their close friends and family.

"My sister and I have always been very close. We work together, both at work and here... I mean, at home, we study together. We talk about the same topics. That's why it's so nice." (P12)

"I had friends. I didn't even know where to go. They had already lived here and experienced everything. They told me, 'Do this, do that.' I went with my friends, and they guided me; they were with me." (P5)

Subtheme 5: Factors Influencing Their Choice of Nursing School

Participants stated that their goal had always been to study nursing and that a diploma from a nursing school in Türkiye holds international validity, which influenced their decision.

"My father is a nurse; there are many nurses in my family. I observed them when I was a child. That's why I love nursing, it feels like it's in my blood." (P6)

"It feels like this. I love helping. Nurses work with people, not with things. I also love helping people." (P7)

"I like taking care of patients and helping people. In the end, we can do something that makes others happy with us." (P8)

"You can go to more countries. They hire nurses. That's why I chose nursing. I didn't think about the salary or anything. I chose nursing so I could travel to more countries, like working in Canada or Germany." (P11)

Theme 2. Challenges

Subtheme 1: Cultural Differences

Participants stated that social and cultural differences between their home countries and Türkiye created difficulties.

"No one helps you here, ma'am. Well, it's not like that in my home country. There, if someone has a problem, people help them." (P10)

"I'm used to Iranian food. Rice, for example. Eating here is very challenging for me, and I have lost a lot of weight." (P6)

Subtheme 2: Language Barrier

Participants stated that they had difficulty reading and writing in the Turkish language, which affected their academic performance.

"Not speaking the same language is very difficult. I couldn't communicate with others at all. I mean, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even shop. I had no self-confidence whatsoever. I could only understand about 20-30% of the courses." (P1)

"We are foreigners, so we can make mistakes. We may not understand some things. We may ask questions again and again. But

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants

Student (P)	Age (years)	Gender	Duration of stay in Türkiye	Place of residence	Socio-economic status after migration	How it arrives	Country of origin	Want to return to the hometown
P1	22	Woman	1.5 years	House / with sister	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	Undecided
P2	23	Man	1 year	House / with housemate	Income less than expenses	Foreign Student Exam	Iran	Undecided
P3	18	Man	8 months	House / with housemate	Income less than expenses	Foreign Student Exam	Iran	Undecided
P4	19	Man	9 months	House / with housemate	Income less than expenses	With diploma score	Iran	No
P5	23	Woman	8 months	House / with housemate	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	No
P6	24	Woman	8 months	House / with housemate	Income equal to expenses	Foreign Student Exam	Iran	Undecided
P7	32	Woman	2 years	House / with partner	Income equal to expenses	Foreign Student Exam	Iran	No
P8	20	Woman	8 months	House / with housemate	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	No
P9	22	Man	1.5 years	Dormitory	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iraq	Undecided
P10	26	Woman	7 months	Dormitory	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	Yes
P11	20	Man	7 months	House / with housemate	Income equal to expenses	Foreign Student Exam	Iran	No
P12	28	Woman	2.5 years	House / with family	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	No
P13	26	Man	9 months	House / with housemate	Income equal to expenses	With diploma score	Iran	No

some people always laugh at us. This has happened several times. Some courses, like Turkish language classes, are very difficult for us.” (P4)

“I can speak easily, but I struggle in class. I couldn’t read the texts well. I couldn’t finish tests on time. In exams, for example, I cannot read the paper quickly.” (P6)

“The teacher gives lectures very quickly. As foreigners, we struggle to understand. Sometimes, we don’t understand because we are not fluent in the language. They explain everything so fast that we cannot keep up.” (P11)

Subtheme 3: Discrimination

The majority of participants stated that they were subjected to discrimination and prejudiced attitudes, which caused them to experience negative emotions.

“In other countries, you are a foreigner. They talk to me as if I don’t belong here.” (P12)

“I moved to another room. I don’t know, you wake up in the morning, make some noise, cook meals. Then they say, ‘Your food smells bad.’ It’s as if I came from a bad country. It makes me feel bad. It feels like humiliation, and it makes me sad.” (P10)

“Turkish people are against foreigners. As far as I know, they are especially against refugees... There are so many refugees here. Because they see refugees as foreigners, they see us as foreigners too. They treat us the same way, and this bothers me. For example, it sometimes happens when you speak a foreign language on public transport or in public places. People give harsh looks.” (P7)

“We talked a lot with him, chatted, etc. After that, he asked to see my ID card. After seeing my foreign identity, he changed so much... He said ‘I wonder, is there a house in your country? Is there a phone there? Where do you live?’ etc... Since the moment I opened my eyes to the world, I have actually always been discriminated against.” (P9)

Subtheme 4: Legal Problems

The participants stated that they had difficulties receiving guidance for situations such as immigration administration procedures and insurance. They also mentioned that they could not benefit from opportunities such as staying in a state dormitory.

“It is difficult for foreigners. I have no health insurance here. My medicines are expensive. If I have a toothache, I have no insurance. I can’t go to the hospital (he means state hospital, which is

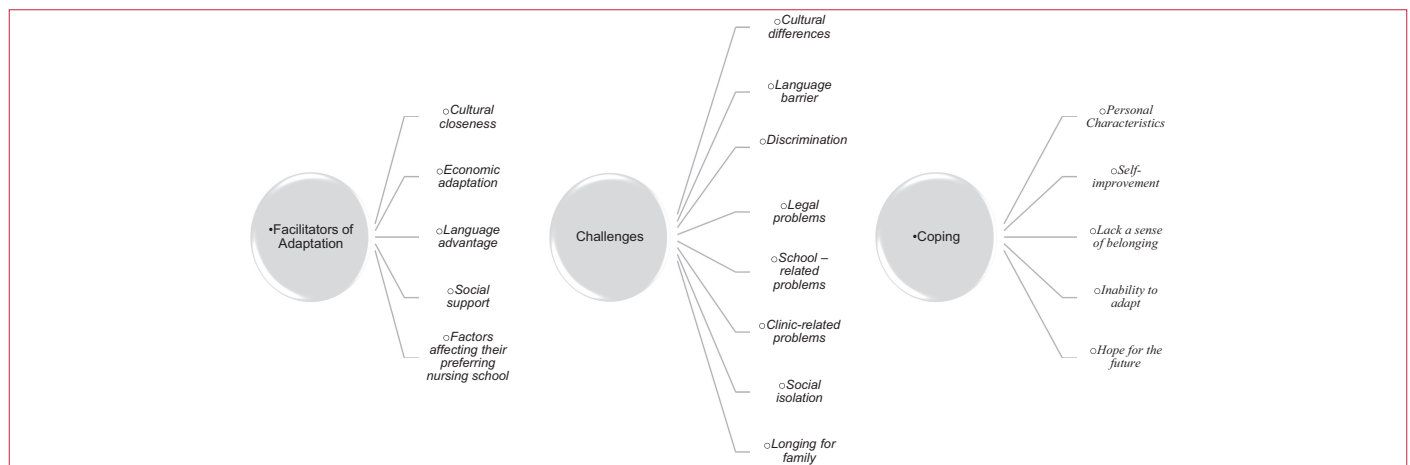


Figure 1. Themes related to the first-Year experiences of international nursing students.

free of charge) for dental treatment or if I have a health problem.” (P6)

“I had a problem with the Immigration Administration. I am a student; it was very crowded when I made an appointment. I mean, there were no privileges for students.” (P7)

“You know the Social Security Institution, don’t you? Türkiye allows us to register only once. Türkiye allotted us a period of ninety days. I missed it. I’m currently using private insurance, but it is of no use.” (P8)

“The state dormitory does not accept us. We are obliged to stay in private dormitories. It costs a lot. Together with the school fee, it is too much. It never rains; it pours.” (P11)

“Finding an apartment was a lot of trouble. I had problems there. I wanted to stay in the dormitory, but they wanted my ID and address. I don’t have a home address.” (P2)

Subtheme 5: School-Related Problems

The participants stated that they found the disruptions and processes at school challenging.

“I took the exam, but well, we’re not good at classical tests. We can’t write, I can talk, but I can’t write that much. I failed four courses because I could hardly study my lessons.” (P10)

“The seventh week was over, then they said we had to take the mid-term exam. I asked what a midterm exam was. Then, after that, we had to take final exams. There was no break between them, we had to take them one after the other. I had a hard time.” (P5)

“Sometimes, I notice they lack planning. At the university, for example, when it comes to exam schedules...” (P1)

Subtheme 6: Clinic-Related Problems

The participants stated that they experienced technical and communication-based problems in their clinical practices at school.

“Twenty of us are doing practical training, but there is only one model. We have to take turns. It is a little difficult.” (P12)

“We also feel that the teachers do not care much, or they ask too many questions. They question us because we are foreigners. The moment I realize how someone treats foreigners, I approach the situation differently. That’s also how I treat my patients. The first thing I say is that I am a foreigner. Here’s what I read in their eyes.” (P8)

“We asked for serum, for physiological saline solution. We also took one serum. Everything was ready. We asked one of the nurses for help. She was just supposed to put the patient on a drip because we didn’t know how to do it yet. No one was supportive.” (P11)

Subtheme 7: Social Isolation

The participants stated that they could not make friends in Türkiye due to discrimination and that they only interacted with friends from their own country.

“We are more sincere, friendlier. They are not like that here. I think they are unfriendly; I am more sincere. They never talk to people. They are not warm-hearted; they look down on you; they consider themselves superior. They see us as inferior... I know this, so I don’t think what they do is right. That’s why I only form relationships with Iranians.” (P10)

“I built a life outside of university. My current friends are only Iranians. I don’t have any relationships with Turkish people.” (P8)

“I can’t talk to my Turkish friends much; there is no one. There are only two Iranians, but they always go back to Iran. I stay here alone.” (P3)

Subtheme 8: Longing for Family

The participants stated that living in another country, away from their families, caused them to experience challenging emotions.

“Something happened to my grandmother. She was in the hospital. Everyone except me knew her condition was bad. I’m so sad. You’re far away, you can’t get any news, what happened? What did not happen? They don’t tell you anything. There were also problems within the family. All of this affected me a lot.” (P5)

"My father-in-law passed away. It was a very difficult situation. I didn't know at first. These things happen. When you live far from your family, things like this can occur. You can't always reach them. It's very difficult." (P7)

Theme 3. Coping

Subtheme 1: Adaptive Coping Methods – Personal Characteristics

The participants stated that they had coping skills thanks to their personal characteristics.

"I solve all my problems myself. Even if I need money, I try to handle it on my own." (P5)

"I can be friends with anyone. It doesn't matter where they're from. After all, what matters is that they are human. That's why, whether it's a man or a woman, they're all the same to me. I can get along with everyone." (P10)

"But the next thing I know, I'm in Izmir (a city on the west coast of Türkiye), I'm at school, I'm in the profession I want. I think it's worth it. The difficulties are worth it." (P6)

Subtheme 2: Adaptive Coping Methods – Self-Improvement

We observed that the participants developed a coping system by focusing on improving their own goals.

"Now the problems are over because I am doing something. I'm working, and I'm pretty good at my job. I mean, I'm busy. I feel good, and I'm also doing well in my studies. If my classes continue like this, I'll be fine. I set goals for myself. For example, I say, 'I will read this today!'" (P5)

"I entered university life. I learned many things. My language has improved. Now I can read, write, and learn everything. I have learned so much. Now I feel better." (P11)

Subtheme 3: Maladaptive Coping Methods – Lack of a Sense of Belonging

The participants stated that they felt like outsiders in this country and that they did not feel a sense of belonging in Türkiye.

"I'm like broken glass... I mean, I tried everything, I succeeded, but it was very difficult... We, as foreigners, struggle with everything." (P10)

"I usually stay silent. For example, a year has passed. There are three more years. Okay, then it's over. I endure in silence; I don't say anything. I just wait." (P7)

"Outside, maybe we can defend our own rights a little. You know, when people are unfair, maybe we can stand up for ourselves. But we can't do that at school because I will probably see that person for months or years. So, I tell myself, 'Forget it.'" (P8)

Subtheme 4: Maladaptive Coping Methods – Inability to Adapt

The participants stated that they could not adapt to school or Türkiye and that they felt exhausted.

"I have tried to adapt here, but I can't be like them. I don't know... They have fun, go to bars, drink, etc. I don't do those things." (P10)

"I don't get excited about anything anymore because I constantly experience problems. Everything feels normal to me now. For

example, if I go to Alaçatı (a small, charming town on the west coast of Türkiye), if I sit by the sea and watch the view, even if it were supposed to be my happiest day, there is no enthusiasm left in me." (P9)

Subtheme 5: Hope for the Future

The participants stated that they felt freer in Türkiye and emphasized the change they experienced.

"This is my first time living in another country. It is freer. I can say that here, you have freedom and self-confidence. I feel more comfortable. I sleep peacefully." (P13)

"Everything is changing. All of a sudden, you're on a plane, and your whole life changes..." (P6)

Discussion

Theme 1. Facilitators of Adaptation

In this study, participants stated that similarities between Türkiye's economy and culture and their own country's economic and cultural codes, their ability to speak the Turkish language, their opportunity to study at a nursing school aligned with their goals, and the social support they received from relatives all contributed to their adaptation to Türkiye. Additionally, the majority of participants came to Türkiye from Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Iraq, which share borders with the southern and eastern regions of Türkiye. Studies conducted with students from Middle Eastern countries suggest that traditional practices similar to their own culture facilitate the adaptation process.^{2,34} For some students, particularly those from neighboring countries, the cultural proximity of Turkish culture, including shared religious rituals and similarities in cuisine, contributes to cultural adaptation.² Linguistic advantages are another factor that facilitates adaptation, as language skills serve as the primary channel for effective communication, accelerating the students' adjustment process. It has been observed that students with language proficiency experience cultural similarities more fully through accurate communication.³⁵ The economic similarities between Türkiye and their home countries, which enable international students to balance their income and expenses, can also be considered a facilitating factor in this study. It is well known that the financial status of international students is closely linked to their adaptation to university and, consequently, their academic success.¹⁶ Supporting these students, particularly in terms of language and financial needs, may be a critical factor in their adjustment to nursing school.

International students' ability to connect with the nursing profession and their career aspirations related to the field facilitates their adaptation to the nursing program. The level of satisfaction that international students derive from their nursing education significantly influences their ability to adapt.¹⁶ Preparing for their chosen field, destination country, and the language of instruction before starting university simplifies the transition process for most international students.³⁶ Satisfaction with the nursing program can also enhance international students' academic performance and motivation.³⁷ In this context, increasing the international promotion of nursing programs could help foster students' motivation at an early stage.

Theme 2. Challenges

This study highlights the diverse challenges faced by international nursing students. Most participants reported that language barriers

and cultural differences were significant sources of stress in both academic and social life. In particular, language barriers played a decisive role in students' class participation, exam performance, and clinical practice processes.^{2,6,16,38} Similar studies also support the notion that language and cultural differences negatively impact academic success and social integration.^{39,40} This situation may indirectly undermine students' confidence and academic performance. Moreover, due to language barriers, international students often struggle to establish comfortable relationships with academic and administrative staff and to express themselves effectively.⁴¹ This underscores the need to recognize that language barriers can become a serious source of anxiety. To enhance academic success and ensure social integration, it is crucial to establish international relations offices, academic support programs, and culturally sensitive educational environments.

According to the results of this study, the need to cope with financial and procedural difficulties increases students' stress levels and negatively affects their academic performance. Findings indicate that international students often cannot sufficiently benefit from scholarship and dormitory opportunities, forcing them to work while studying.^{38,39} This situation limits international students' academic and professional development and lowers their quality of life. Providing them with job and scholarship opportunities is expected to alleviate these stressors and facilitate their daily lives and communication.⁴⁰

The international students in this study encountered challenges in both theoretical and clinical education processes. Language barriers were reported to hinder class participation, potentially leading to lower exam scores and academic difficulties.^{2,38} Although these students had been academically successful in their home countries, they reported struggling to understand lectures, participate in class discussions, and ask questions, which might contribute to lower grades. This situation could result in feelings of inadequacy, a loss of self-confidence, and a possible decline in academic performance. While international students are expected to adapt to a different education system and language, they also face challenges in communicating with local students.⁴² Therefore, creating a learning environment sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences is critically important. Establishing international relations offices that coordinate with academic staff could provide valuable support to students throughout this transition.⁴³ During clinical practice, international students reported experiencing technical and communication-related difficulties.⁴⁴ Performing clinical tasks in groups was perceived as increasing performance anxiety, and having to complete these tasks in a foreign language in an unfamiliar country appeared to intensify this anxiety.^{43,45} Cultural and linguistic differences may lead to "culture shock," emphasizing the need for support from instructors.⁴⁶ Students also expressed fears of being rejected by patients during clinical practice and reported encountering negative attitudes from nurses.⁴³ It is important to consider that negative experiences, especially during their first year, may increase anxiety and potentially affect the development of their professional identity.

The international students in this study reported experiencing increasing isolation and forming their own international peer groups due to discrimination and prejudice directed toward them. Many international students tend to avoid interacting with local peers, stating that they perceive these peers as prejudiced, uninterested in conversation, and mocking them.⁶ Various studies have shown that

local peers often exclude international students, discriminate against them, mock them, avoid communication, and even subject them to verbal and physical bullying.^{2,47} Discrimination and limited social interaction lead international students to engage more with other international students, forming groups based on a shared sense of "foreignness."⁴¹ University education is not solely about acquiring professional knowledge and skills; it also provides an environment for students to develop meaningful relationships with their peers. However, due to language barriers and cultural differences, international students struggle to communicate with the local community, which may hinder social integration.

In addition to these challenges, international students in this study reported experiencing homesickness and longing for their families. In Türkiye, Syrian university students in particular lack social support and frequently express missing their families.⁶ International students tend to interact only with students from their own nationality, leading them to struggle with loneliness and isolation, while also coping with the emotional challenges of being separated from their homes and families.³⁹ These students describe their longing for their home countries as a depressive and anxiety-inducing process that complicates their adaptation and coping in a new country.³⁶ They undergo a challenging period of adjusting to cultural and linguistic differences during their first year. Given the lack of social support, it is essential to recognize that these students belong to a vulnerable group and may experience a weakened sense of belonging to their school. In this context, developing support mechanisms to guide students in both academic and social life will facilitate their coping process.

Theme 3. Coping

The international students in this study demonstrated that, thanks to their strong personal attributes, they were able to cope with challenges and remain focused on their goals. Nursing students from developing countries who study in developed countries experience the "joy of learning" despite the difficulties and obstacles they encounter.⁴⁸ Successfully overcoming cultural and language challenges contributes to both personal and professional growth, which these students take pride in.³⁶ Many international students reported that their satisfaction increased through their own efforts, open-mindedness, and personal development.^{3,37} This, in turn, allows them to "act like a nurse," thereby strengthening their professional identity.³⁶

However, the challenges faced by many international students in this study have undermined their coping skills and made them feel excluded. It is believed that their inability to adapt stems from their limited vocabulary and their difficulty in expressing thoughts, situations, and concepts clearly and concisely.⁴³ Traumatic experiences, such as feeling devalued, lonely, and isolated due to marginalization, racism, and bullying by peers, intensify students' longing for the past.^{47,48} Financial difficulties further limit participation in extracurricular activities, deepening their social isolation.³⁹ When students feel misunderstood by their peers, they often choose to remain silent and show resilience, believing that this phase is temporary.³ It is crucial to develop procedures and support systems that enable these vulnerable students to access the necessary resources.

Despite these challenges, international students do not lose hope for growth and change. The challenging attitudes exhibited by local peers do not prevent international students from achieving their goal of graduating from nursing school and remaining focused on

their ultimate objectives.³ In fact, the process of discovering their academic and clinical nursing skills and realizing their professional potential contributes to their personal and professional development.³⁷ This progress helps students adopt and develop their nursing roles more effectively.

Limitations

In this study, while some participants were able to express themselves effectively because their native language was Azerbaijani, a dialect of Turkish, others experienced difficulty speaking Turkish. This language barrier may have made it challenging for some participants to fully convey their views during the interviews. These students were given additional time to communicate and were allowed to express themselves in English when they had difficulty choosing words. Another limitation of this study is that the majority of participants were from the same country, which may have influenced the representation of international nursing students' experiences in Türkiye from a broader perspective. Another limitation is that, although the interviewer had no direct relationship with the participants, they served as their instructor for theoretical courses. This might have hindered participants from fully expressing the challenges they faced. However, the interviewer's role as an educator also fostered therapeutic trust, enriching the data. The interviewer was aware of this dynamic during the interviews and took it into account during the data analysis process.

Conclusion

The education process of future professional nurses is crucial, as nursing is a profession centered on caring for people. In this regard, nursing students should complete their education in a healthy and supportive environment during their university years. University adaptation is a complex process that includes not only theoretical and clinical education but also sociocultural adjustment. This adaptation process can be particularly challenging for international nursing students, who speak different languages and come from diverse cultural backgrounds. International nursing students must cope not only with the demanding nature of nursing education but also with the challenge of adapting to a new country and culture. In this study, it was observed that the adaptation process of international nursing students who had just started their education was easier if they shared a similar culture, spoke the same language, and received social support. The challenges experienced by the participants included language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, social isolation, longing for family, and academic and clinical difficulties. While some students were able to cope with these challenges due to their strong personal characteristics and focus on their goals, others who struggled to adapt felt excluded and isolated. In this regard, instructors and university staff should be informed about the adaptation process of international students to better support them. By providing appropriate support, students will be better equipped to navigate this transition successfully, ultimately enabling them to achieve a well-rounded and effective nursing education.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was obtained from Dokuz Eylül University Non-interventional Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 7853-GOA, Protocol Number: 2023/05-40, Date: 22.02.2023).

Informed Consent: Written and verbal consent was then obtained from each participant.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Concept – G.Z.T., M.T.; Design – G.Z.T.; Supervision – M.T.; Data Collection and/or Processing – G.Z.T.; Analysis and/or Interpretation - G.Z.T., M.T.; Literature Review – M.T.; Writing – G.Z.T.; Critical Review – G.Z.T., M.T.

Conflict of Interests: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding: The authors declared that this study received no financial support.

References

- Kıroğlu K, Kesten A, Elma C. Türkiye'de öğrenim gören yabancı uyruklu lisans öğrencilerinin sosyo-kültürel ve ekonomik sorunları. *Mersin Univ Eğitim Fak Derg.* 2010;6(2):26-39.
- Özaslan ZZ, Yalçın SU, Alptekin HM, et al. Hemşirelik bölümü yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin öğrenim süreci deneyimleri. *Anadolu Hemşirelik Sağlık Bilimleri Derg.* 2019;22(3):170-178.
- Sanner S, Wilson AH, Samson LF. The experiences of international nursing students in a baccalaureate nursing program. *J Prof Nurs.* 2002;18(4):206-213. [CrossRef]
- Özer M. Türkiye'de uluslararası öğrenciler. *Yükseköğretim Bilim Derg.* 2012;2(1):10-13. [CrossRef]
- Sungur MA, Şahin M, Gökhan C, et al. Düzce üniversitesinde yükseköğrenim gören yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin yaşam doyumları ve sosyal uyumlarını etkileyen faktörler. *Düzce Univ Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü Derg.* 2016;6(2):101-109.
- Kaya Y. "If only they forgot that I was Syrian and an Arab, I am a human beings too." Syrian university students' experiences of being a foreigner: a phenomenological study. *Int J Intercult Relat.* 2021;83:43-54. [CrossRef]
- Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi. 2021-2022 öğretim yılı öğrenci istatistikleri. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>
- Yelken C, Yazıcı H, Altun F. YÖS ile üniversiteye yerleşen yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin stresle başa çıkma stilleri, problem çözme becerileri ve yardım arama davranışları. *Yükseköğretim Derg.* 2020;10(1):27-37. [CrossRef]
- Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu. Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Uyruklarına Göre Sayıları, 2023-2024. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>
- International Organization for Migration. World Migration Report 2022. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/WMR-2022.pdf>
- Scanlon L, Rowling L, Weber Z. 'You don't have like an identity... You are just lost in a crowd': Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *J Youth Stud.* 2007;10(2):223-241. [CrossRef]
- Mitchell C, Del Fabbro L, Shaw J. The acculturation, language and learning experiences of international nursing students: Implications for nursing education. *Nurse Educ Today.* 2017;56:16-22. [CrossRef]
- Gebhard JG. International students' adjustment problems and behaviors. *J Int Stud.* 2012;2(2):184-193. [CrossRef]
- Topal F, Tauscher S. Uluslararası öğrencilerin akademik ve sosyal yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları sorunlar üzerine inceleme. *Akad İncelemeler Derg.* 2020;15(1):309-344. [CrossRef]
- Kartal YA, Işık C, Yazıcı S. Determination of the factors affecting the social and academic adjustment of international students studying at a public university. *Zeynep Kamil Tıp Bul.* 2018;49(1):1-5. [CrossRef]
- Yılmaz D, Mistik Ö, Arkan B, Çınar HG. An examination of adaptation problems of foreign students studying in the nursing department: An example from bursa Uludağ university. *J Innov Healthc Pract.* 2021;2(1):23-32.
- Shali M, Bakhshi F, Hasanpour M. Culture of patient care among international nursing students: A focused ethnographic study. *BMC Nurs.* 2024;23(1):163. [CrossRef]
- Sun H, Liu S, Nagai A, Guo L, Lü Y. Cross-cultural adaptation for international nursing students from the Belt and Road Initiative in China: A follow-up survey study. *Heliyon.* 2023;9(11):e21898. [CrossRef]
- Asal MGR, Atta MHR, El-Ashry AM, et al. International nursing students' culture shock and academic engagement: The moderating role of resilience. *Nurse Educ Today.* 2025;145:106499. [CrossRef]
- Ünsal E, Yalcinkaya T, Dönmez A, Yücel SC. "A different country, a different language, a different culture..." Educational experiences of international

- nursing students studying in Turkey: A qualitative study. *Nurse Educ Pract.* 2024;77:103950. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
21. Hasanzpour M, Bakhshi F, Shali M. Lived experiences of international nursing students regarding the studying challenges: A phenomenology study. *Int J Nurs Educ Scholarsh.* 2025;22(1):20240038. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 22. Ivziku D, Badolamenti S, Giannetta N, et al. International nursing students and clinical learning environments: A convergent mixed-methods study. *Nurse Educ Pract.* 2024;80:104144. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 23. Gündüz M, Alakbarov N. Analysis of social adjustment factors of international students in Türkiye. *J Int Stud.* 2019;9(4):1155-1171. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 24. Buran G, Başoğlu M, Cindaş P. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin kültürel özellikleri, kadın sağlığı ve sağlık hizmeti alımı ilişkisi. *Dokuz Eylül Univ Hemşirelik Fak Electron Derg.* 2023;16(1):51-62. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 25. Dancot J, Pétré B, Dardenne N, Donneau AF, Detroz P, Guillaume M. Exploring the relationship between first-year nursing student self-esteem and dropout: A cohort study. *J Adv Nurs.* 2021;77(6):2748-2760. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 26. Bradshaw C, Atkinson S, Doody O. Employing a qualitative description approach in health care research. *Glob Qual Nurs Res.* 2017;4:2333393617742282. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 27. Doyle L, McCabe C, Keogh B, Brady A, McCann M. An overview of the qualitative descriptive design within nursing research. *J Res Nurs.* 2020;25(5):443-455. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 28. Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *Int J Qual Health Care.* 2007;19(6):349-357. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 29. Rahimi S, Khatooni M. Saturation in qualitative research: An evolutionary concept analysis. *Int J Nurs Stud Adv.* 2024;6:100174. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 30. Tuckett AG. Part II. Rigour in qualitative research: complexities and solutions. *Nurse Res.* 2005;13(1):29-42. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 31. Elo S, Kyngäs H. The qualitative content analysis process. *J Adv Nurs.* 2008;62(1):107-115. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 32. Ravindran V. Data analysis in qualitative research. *Indian J Cont Nsg Edn.* 2019;20(1):40-45. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 33. Lindgren BM, Lundman B, Graneheim UH. Abstraction and interpretation during the qualitative content analysis process. *Int J Nurs Stud.* 2020;108:103632. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 34. Karipek YZ. Asylum-Seekers experience and acculturation: A study of Syrian university students in Türkiye. *Turk J Middle East Stud.* 2017;Special Issue : 105-133. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 35. Aliyev R, Öğülmüş S. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin kültürlenme düzeylerinin incelenmesi. *Anemon.* 2016;4(1):89-123. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 36. Vardaman SA, Mastel-Smith B. The transitions of international nursing students. *Teach Learn Nurs.* 2016;11(2):34-43. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 37. Eden A, Fleet JA, Cominos N. The learning experiences of international students in nursing and midwifery programs: A literature review. *Nurse Educ Pract.* 2021;52:103027. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 38. Dartan M, Ersoy İS, Şirin NA, Deniz P. Marmara Üniversitesi'ndeki Suriyeli öğrencilerin pandemi döneminde uygulanan hibrit eğitimde yaşadıkları sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri. *Marmara Üniversitesi Avrupa Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi.* 2023;31(1):1-36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 39. Malecha A, Tart K, Junious DL. Foreign-born nursing students in the United States: A literature review. *J Prof Nurs.* 2012;28(5):297-305. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 40. Tuzcu A, Bademli K, Kırcı N, Günbayı İ. Uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencilerinin eğitim sürecine ilişkin görüşleri: Fenomonolojik bir araştırma. *Düzce Univ Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü Derg.* 2020;10(1):100-107. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 41. Şahin SA, Çelik Z. Dışlanma ve umut arasında: Suriyeli yükseköğretim öğrencilerinin deneyimleri. *Yükseköğretim Bilim Derg.* 2020;10(3):494-503. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 42. Jeong SYS, Hickey N, Levett-Jones T, et al. Understanding and enhancing the learning experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse nursing students in an Australian bachelor of nursing program. *Nurse Educ Today.* 2011;31(3):238-244. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 43. Kol E, Arıkan F, Arıkan C, Yabarow F, Günbayı İ. Being an international nursing student in Türkiye: A qualitative study. *Perspect Psychiatr Care.* 2021;57(1):66-72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 44. Parlar Kılıç SP, Karadağ G, Kılıç N, Demirel C. Difficulties and expectations of foreign nursing students in the clinic. *J Comp Int High Educ.* 2021;13(1):114-132. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 45. Haraldseid C, Friberg F, Aase K. Nursing students' perceptions of factors influencing their learning environment in a clinical skills laboratory: A qualitative study. *Nurse Educ Today.* 2015;35(9):e1-e6. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 46. Mikkonen K, Elo S, Miettunen J, Saarikoski M, Kääriäinen M. Clinical learning environment and supervision of international nursing students: A cross-sectional study. *Nurse Educ Today.* 2017;52:73-80. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 47. Newsome LK, Cooper P. International Students' Cultural and Social Experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here". *J Int Stud.* 2016;6(1):195-215. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
 48. Wang CW, Singh C, Bird B, Ives G. The learning experiences of Taiwanese nursing students studying in Australia. *J Transcult Nurs.* 2008;19(2):140-150. [\[CrossRef\]](#)