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“All I Have is Myself”: The Resilience of International Students Navigating Cultural Transitions and Support Systems in India

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ABSTRACT: *This study employed an embedded mixed-methods exploratory design to investigate international students in India, focusing on resilience, perceived support, and academic adjustment. In the qualitative phase, nine students were interviewed, revealing two main themes: (1) institutional support and peer networks, and (2) resilience through self-reliance. The results revealed that support systems are vital for cultural and academic adjustment. Due to limited access, the students relied on self-reliance, which fostered personal resilience that aided in adaptation. The quantitative phase analyzed the relationship between social support and academic adjustment using data from 180 students, employing mediation analysis. The findings indicated that perceived social support had a positive influence on academic adjustment, whereas duration of stay did not mediate this relationship.*

Keywords: Academic adjustment, international students, institutional support, self-reliance, self-resilience

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INTRODUCTION

"*All I have is myself*," stated one participant, a concise yet meaningful statement that captures an emotional and survival strategy. It reflects the reality faced by many international students as they navigate life in a new country, balancing academic demands with the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar cultural and emotional environments. (Eusafzai & Suleman, 2024). Although international education is frequently regarded as a transformative opportunity, the lived experiences of many students include a more subdued story characterized by resilience, solitude, and self-reliance (Nyuant et al., 2023).

International students constitute some of the most diverse groups engaged in global mobility; however, their complexity is frequently oversimplified through classifications based solely on nationality or visa status (Udah et al., 2024; Parlak et al., 2025; Pawar & Dasgupta, 2024). Such restrictive frameworks fail to recognize the varied challenges and overlapping needs of these students, thereby restricting institutions' capacity to deliver inclusive and targeted academic and pastoral support (Jones, 2017). Few researchers acknowledge the academic and sociocultural adjustment challenges faced by international students, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and limited peer integration, which often result in emotional stress and academic difficulties (Shettar & Latha, 2020; Lu et al., 2024; Mak et al., 2015; Hennings & Tanabe, 2018; Chang et al., 2024). Although educational institutions may offer formal support services, they often fail to adequately address students' more profound cultural and psychological needs, resulting in many students relying more heavily on personal coping mechanisms rather than institutional structures (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023).

While resilience among international students has been widely studied, most research has focused on Western contexts (Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Larcombe et al., 2023; Parlak et al., 2025), which differ from India's institutional, cultural, and academic systems. This study explores the Indian higher education system, highlighting unique challenges and opportunities. In India, resilience is shaped by

family and societal support (Ahmad Dar et al., 2023; Hebbani & Srinivasan, 2016), as well as a collectivist culture that encourages endurance and persistence (Bansal & Kapur, 2023; Butu et al., 2023). International students often overcome obstacles with minimal external support, relying on internal motivation and guidance from families in India (Shinde & Lee, 2020). In contrast, those in Western countries demonstrate resilience through individualistic values and institutional support, such as counseling and peer networks (Akanwa, 2015). This highlights the cultural aspect of resilience and its need for context-sensitive aid. The research examines how cultural settings, social support, and resilience impact students' academic and social adjustment in India and whether residence duration serves as a mediator in this process.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Resilience and Perceived Support System among International Students

Resilience, defined as the ability to cope with and recover from adversity (Weidong et al., 2012; Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Udah et al., 2024), is closely linked to self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's capacity to manage challenges (Bandura, 1977; Rayyan et al., 2023). Self-management and self-regulation are crucial for developing resilience and facilitating students' adaptation to college life (Jing & Kim, 2021; Artuch-Garde et al., 2017). All these factors support students' effective adaptation and persistence in challenging situations (Rayyan et al., 2023; Ding, 2024). This is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process influenced by both internal characteristics and external conditions (Zautra et al., 2010; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Udah et al., 2024). International students frequently encounter stress and anxiety due to cultural, academic, and social adjustments. Resilience is key in helping them navigate these challenges and adapt successfully to their new environment (Zhang et al., 2023; Udah et al., 2024; Amol et al., 2025). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, resilience is shaped by interactions between the individual and their surrounding environments, including the family, community, cultural context, and broader societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Various studies have also shown that resilience is positively correlated with optimism (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015), self-compassion (Larcombe et al., 2023), a sense of community (Zhang et al., 2023), and social support (Ahmad Dar et al., 2023; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Weidong et al., 2012; Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Wilks & Spivey, 2010; Myers et al., 2023; Ungar, 2011; AlJuboori et al., 2025; Brunsting et al., 2019). This suggests that international students who receive emotional and financial support from friends, family, relatives, and significant others, such as landlords, neighbors, supervisors, and lecturers, tend to demonstrate higher levels of resilience (Wilks & Spivey, 2010; Akanwa, 2015). These support systems help students better cope with stress and adjust to new environments (Zhang et al., 2023).

Social support is a multifaceted construct and a vital tool for international students to manage acculturative stress and its subsequent effects, including

physical symptoms, anxiety, and depression (Parlak et al., 2025; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Cipolletta et al., 2021). It exerts a direct positive effect on student satisfaction while also functioning as an indirect mechanism for achieving cultural adjustment (Lu et al., 2024; Amzat et al., 2024). Social support, encompassing both perceived and actual social connections, also plays a crucial role in mental well-being by enhancing resilience and protecting against psychological distress, including depression (Schartner & Young, 2020; Marginson, 2013; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). While international student enrollment is central to institutional internationalization, support services must align with their needs to foster an inclusive campus climate (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). However, research suggests a mismatch between university staff and international students in how they perceive those needs and the staff's role in addressing them, which can limit the effectiveness of available support services (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

Perceived Social Support, Duration of Stay, and Academic Adjustment

Perceptions of support systems vary across cultures, and even when universities offer help, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and misalignment in how that support is received or used. For instance, Roberts and Dunworth (2012) reported that students' expectations of service delivery are often misaligned with actual delivery, resulting from contradictory advice, a service structure not tailored to students' needs, and fragmented delivery. Cipolletta et al. (2021) reported that different cultural practices also shape social inclusion and expectations of support. Collectivist cultures often emphasize close bonds and group belonging, whereas individualistic cultures may seek support more independently, leading to differing perceptions of social inclusion (Bansal & Kapur, 2023; Butu et al., 2023). By providing adequate support and resources to address various social, personal, and academic factors influencing mental health among university students, institutions can increase both students' academic success and their personal well-being (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023).

The duration of residence is a contentious predictor in the process of student adjustment. Some research suggests that the length of stay is predictive of academic adjustment (Bastien et al., 2018), whereas other studies dispute this assertion (Lawani et al., 2012). Additionally, certain studies suggest that adjustment varies across different domains, thereby indirectly influencing academic outcomes (Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023; Rujipak & Limprasert, 2016). Variations in length of residence, such as short-term or long-term stays, may also affect adjustment (Cipolletta et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to validate the literature by examining students' experiences of resilience and institutional support, as well as their duration of stay and social support, as predictors of international student academic adjustment.

Therefore, the research questions developed to address this gap are as follows:

RQ1: How do international students studying in India perceive and experience the support system in their academic and everyday lives?

RQ2: To what extent do perceived social support and duration of stay predict academic adjustment among international students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This research's novel contribution is the application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1986), particularly the macrosystem, to study the resilience of international students in India. Although widely used elsewhere, its use in international student research is limited, making this a unique approach. The study also employs an embedded nested exploratory mixed-methods design, examining student experiences with quantitative data on social support as a predictor of academic adjustment and stay duration, with the latter serving as a mediator.

This theory guides this study on the resilience of international students, their perceptions of support, and their academic adjustment in host countries (Figure 1). It helps individuals understand their complex experiences by viewing resilience as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). While the model encompasses all ecological levels, from microsystems (immediate interactions) to exosystems (policies), this study focuses on the macrosystem, specifically cultural values, norms, and expectations relevant to the Indian context. These macro influences shape how international students view challenges, seek support, and show resilience. Highlighting the macrosystem helps us understand how cultural differences between home and host countries (e.g., collectivist vs. individualist) influence perceptions and resilience (Schartner & Young, 2020; Marginson, 2013). Using Bronfenbrenner's theory, studies have demonstrated that resilience and adjustment are culturally mediated responses, not just individual processes (Ungar, 2011; Schartner & Young, 2020). This explains why support systems, despite good intentions, may fail to meet students' culturally rooted needs, which can affect their academic adaptation and well-being (Myers et al., 2023; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

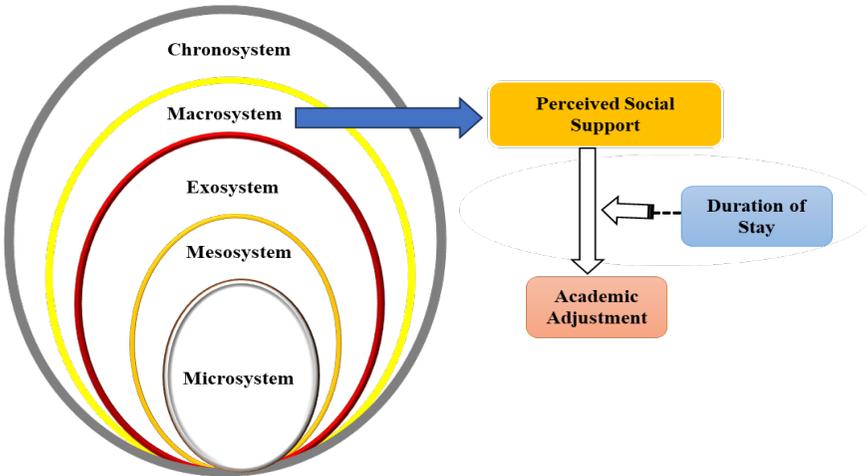


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (Developed by the authors)

METHOD

This study employed an embedded, nested exploratory design, where one methodological approach plays a primary role and the other is embedded to support and enrich the findings within a unified research framework. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The rationale for using this approach lies in the complex and multidimensional nature of international students' resilience and academic adjustment, which cannot be fully captured by either qualitative or quantitative methods alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, the qualitative phase, designed as a case study, serves as the core component, providing in-depth insights into the resilience and academic adjustment of international students through their experiences with perceived support systems. This design and sequencing were intentionally chosen given the limited existing research on international student resilience in the Indian context, which necessitates an exploratory approach to first identify the nuanced, context-specific challenges faced by this group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Nine international students were selected for the qualitative phase via purposive and snowball sampling, as these methods have been shown to be effective in reaching a relatively hard-to-access population and generating rich, narrative data, despite the smaller sample size (Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G., 1985). The quantitative phase is nested within the broader qualitative framework and was used to test and extend emerging patterns, particularly regarding the role of perceived social support and duration of stay. To support and validate the qualitative findings, a survey was administered to 180 international students, using purposive and snowball sampling over a 2–3-month period. This sample size enabled a broader examination of the relationships identified in the interviews while remaining aligned with the exploratory nature of the research. Such a design is ideal when

the research aims to explore complex, context-dependent experiences first and then complement or validate those findings with quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). The embedded approach enables triangulation and enhances the interpretive validity of the study by integrating rich qualitative narratives with supporting statistical evidence (Flynn & Brady, 2021).

Phase One: Qualitative Approach

A case study was conducted with nine international students through semistructured interviews. These participants, who are currently enrolled in Indian universities, were selected via purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in key demographics, including gender (five female and four male students) and country of origin (seven countries in total). The participants' details are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic details of the qualitative phase participants

No.	Participants	Country	<i>Duration of stay in the host country</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1.	Participant 1	Nepal	4 years	Female
2.	Participant 2	Bangladesh	1 year	Female
3.	Participant 3	Bhutan	2 years	Female
4.	Participant 4	Nepal	4 years	Female
5.	Participant 5	Sri Lanka	6 months	Female
6.	Participant 6	Tanzania	4 years	Male
7.	Participant 7	Nigeria	2 years	Male
8.	Participant 8	Tanzania	4 years	Male
9.	Participant 9	Kenya	3 years	Male

Interview Process

The online interviews conducted via video conferences between December 2024 and January 2025 lasted 35--50 minutes. Participants received information sheets and signed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, their rights, and the use of their data. The semistructured interview guide, which is based on Kallio et al.'s (2016) five-phase framework, was developed to ensure rigor and reliability. This involved confirming its suitability, reviewing the relevant literature, and creating a preliminary guide tied to the study's theoretical framework. The guide was pilot tested and refined for clarity and relevance, improving validity and alignment with research goals. During the interviews, open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their experiences of resilience and academic adjustment in the host country.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

All interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Two researchers independently transcribed the recordings to ensure accuracy and consistency. The researcher then followed Creswell & Poth's (2016) data analysis steps: organizing the data, developing understanding, coding, generating themes, and interpreting the findings. To identify themes, the authors employed techniques from Ryan and Bernard (2003), including detecting repeated ideas, using participants' words (in vivo coding), and exploring metaphors to reveal cultural meanings. These methods enhance the reliability of thematic analysis, ensuring that themes accurately reflect participants' experiences. To enhance transparency, participants reviewed transcripts with anonymized data. Field notes and audio recordings captured context and emotional tone. Following the session, the researcher summarized the key points to verify the participants' understanding and ensure an accurate interpretation of the results.

Phase Two: Quantitative Approach

This study employed a quantitative approach to investigate whether perceived social support predicts academic adjustment among international students and whether their length of stay in India influences this relationship. Data were collected from February to May 2025 via structured online questionnaires. Purposive and snowball sampling recruited 180 students from different parts of India through email, LinkedIn, and university networks. Two standardized tools were used: the Academic Adjustment Scale by Anderson et al. (2016), with an alpha coefficient above 0.70 and test-retest reliability over 0.70 for nine items, and the MSPSS, a 12-item scale by Zimet et al. (1998) with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.90. The data were tested for normality and found to be normally distributed, allowing for the use of parametric statistical techniques. Mediation analysis was performed via the free statistical software Jamovi to assess whether the length of stay in India affected the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment. The analysis examined both the direct and indirect effects of perceived social support on academic adjustment outcomes. This quantitative phase complemented and validated the findings from Phase One.

FINDINGS

RQ1: How do international students studying in India perceive and experience the support system in their academic and everyday lives?

Theme One: Institutional Support and Peer Networks

The experience of international students in a host country, from support services to pre-departure assistance, is shaped primarily by the level of support.

Individuals' expectations of reality and perceptions of the support system influence their cultural adaptation and satisfaction with academic success. A participant said, "I was clueless at the airport, feeling afraid and scared, but a university representative called and picked me up, helping me reach the university easily. Overall, my experience was very positive" (Participant 7).

Another participant shared a different experience, saying,

Although a university representative guided me, a language barrier still confused me. After arriving at the airport, I was misled while trying to use local transportation and spent a considerable amount of time overnight. The next day, I reached my university, but it was distressing.
– (Participant 9)

This highlights the importance of institutional support and convenience for students. The same situation yields diverse experiences: one is satisfied and optimistic, whereas the other faces trauma. This aligns with the findings of Ma et al. (2023), who reported that institutional, peer, and family support are key sources of resilience for international students, aiding their cultural adaptation.

The support system during the study also empowers students, making them feel less alone and more supported. For example, a Nepalese student said, "Here, we lack advocates and are classified as international students, separate from locals, which helps us approach the international cell and lodge complaints. They respond promptly and act" (Participant 1). Another student from Tanzania added, "I have visited offices like the warden, International Center, and international coordinator; they are invaluable. The international cell also mediates conflicts (Participant 8). Another student from Nepal mentioned that "We can seek assistance from the hostel warden and the international cell. The international cell requests full details of the incident and then acts fairly on the matter" (Participant 4). Another student, who wished to bring his family with him, encountered difficulties with paperwork and expressed how significantly he was assisted by the international cell at that time, stating, "The difficulties faced in the paper when I wanted my wife to come, applications were rejected many times, it took a long time to obtain permission, and I received help from the international cell" (Participant 7). The participants indicate that institutional support eases the adjustment process and enhances the learning experience, particularly for international students who face additional challenges. Support from international trust increases comfort and enjoyment in a new culture.

While some can work alone, social support from peers and locals makes the journey easier, and having supportive friends or roommates is valuable and beneficial. For example, a student from Bangladesh said,

My roommate and I cooperate well. I pray in my room, and she respects this by not talking during my prayers, which is a courteous gesture. Another student said, "As a foreigner, some might try to take advantage of me, but my roommate helps. I share problems with her. She understands, helps, and calms me when I am angry– (Participant 2)

In addition to institutional and peer support, a senior from the same department or country studied here offers crucial help for international students. They guide documentation before arrival and advise beginning a new life, emphasizing key points to achieve goals. For example, a student from Sri Lanka stated,

In my hostel, a senior from Nepal and a PhD scholar from another department always help me. We are like sisters, and she cares a lot about me. The other hostel mates are also helpful; they assist me whenever I ask– (Participant 5)

Another student from Bangladesh shared her experience of how a senior helped her before departure. She stated,

A senior in Bangladesh guided me through the process, documentation, and considerations before I arrived. She suggested that having enough money to support oneself is crucial. If you have the means, you can resolve any issues; otherwise, no one here will provide financial assistance– (Participant 2)

Similarly, another student from Nepal shared that “my senior suggested to me that the situation would not be easy... your decision would be hard to manage. They advised me to speak strictly and firmly with local or national people; otherwise, they would not take you seriously” (Participant 1). These narratives illustrate how prearrival guidance from senior peers significantly influences students' expectations and coping strategies. The Bangladeshi student received advice on documentation, emphasizing financial self-reliance due to the likelihood of external help and highlighting economic readiness for international students. The Nepali student was warned about challenges and advised to communicate assertively to gain respect. Both offer realistic insights into studying abroad and navigating financial and social challenges through mentoring. This aligns with the findings of Ma et al. (2023), Sabouripour and Roslan (2015), Zhang et al. (2023), Singh (2021), and AlJuboori et al. (2025), which suggest that peer support from the host country and institutions boosts confidence.

Theme Two: Resilience through Self-Reliance

This theme highlights international students' dedication to and development of resilient power throughout the time, reflected through their statements, such as “Having lived here for 3--4 years, I accept difficulties and choose to adjust. Mostly, I handle everything myself, but sometimes I seek help from friends from Bhutan and Nepal who understand Hindi and Indian culture” (Participant 6). Students learn to overcome weaknesses and handle situations without fear or judgment. A student from Bangladesh said, “Initially, I hid my weaknesses like language and study pressure, enduring pain to prove that I could handle things. Over time, I learned to accept my weaknesses and show others I am strong and self-reliant” (Participant 2). This process also makes students more mature, open to the world, and better at self-regulation through adaptation. This aligns with the

findings of Zhang and Goodson's (2011) study, which, through a meta-analysis, determined that the duration of stay in the host country serves as a positive predictor of students' adjustment process. A student from Sri Lanka shared, "Initially, I felt aggressive because my culture and practices did not match the new environment, with language issues and easy anger. Now, I accept the situation, understanding it is their culture and tradition" (Participant 5). Another Bhutanese student said, "The experience broadened my worldview, showing me that the real world can be tough and culturally normal, emphasizing selfishness. I learned to be more patient, cautious, and trusting less" (Participant 3). These participant narratives demonstrate a shift from emotional struggle to resilience, grounded in self-reliance and effective coping strategies. One participant handled challenges alone but sometimes sought support from cultural peers, demonstrating social coping and independence. Another concealed academic and language difficulty seemed strong but later revealed vulnerabilities as growth opportunities. Another recalled early frustration stemming from a cultural mismatch but later came to accept it. One student noted that her international experience expanded her worldview but also exposed her to human selfishness, making her more cautious.

Adapting to unfamiliar environments fosters cultural understanding, self-awareness, and emotional resilience. This personal growth supports students' academic journeys, indirectly enhancing their progress and development. The students' discovery journeys also align with their academic journeys, which indirectly influences their academic progress and growth. The experience of a student from Kenya was as follows: "I sit with myself, trying to understand and accept others' perspectives. Sometimes, I explain my country and culture because you cannot judge me by looks; you need to know me first" (Participant 9). Another student from Tanzania stated, "Whenever the problem is raised, first I will try to analyze the problem, why it arose, and if I find that the problem is not so serious, not important, then I will adapt according to the situation" (Participant 6). These narratives reflect a process of self-discovery and open-mindedness. One student emphasized the importance of introspection and understanding others' perspectives to express her identity through her cultural background, noting that genuine understanding extends beyond appearances. The Tanzanian student also shared a reflective approach, analyzing and calmly adapting to challenges. Both stories demonstrate how international students enhance their self-awareness, remain open to new cultures, and develop resilience through deliberate engagement with these cultures.

Furthermore, Sri Lankan students emphasize mutual respect as a fundamental personal principle for navigating academic and social interactions within a new environment. She stated:

First, I respect everyone, including professors, students, deans, and others. Respect fosters mutual regard and a positive attitude, helping reduce conflicts, whereas disrespect can exacerbate them (Participant 5).

However, sometimes students attempt to be cautious and refrain from getting into trouble, as being an international student is often perceived as precarious in

a new country. A minor mistake could jeopardize their academic progress and result in repatriation, thereby terminating their careers. An opinion from a Tanzanian student was,

We tried to avoid trouble because visiting the police station could be problematic for us due to our student visa status. A small mistake might cancel our admission and hinder our career. (Participant 5)

These findings show that resilience among international students involves self-regulation, respectful conduct, and cautious decision-making. One student emphasized the importance of mutual respect in fostering harmony and avoiding conflicts, demonstrating emotional maturity and cultural awareness. Another highlights the responsibility and awareness of one's legal status, leading to cautious behaviors that protect academic prospects.

Adjusting to a new linguistic and administrative environment represents another immediate challenge for international students. Over time, many develop resilience by learning to navigate these barriers through resourcefulness, persistence, and gradual adaptation. A statement from a student in Nepal illustrates this: "Initially, when I arrived here, it was challenging.

Everyone in the central or administration office speaks Hindi. I tried English; sometimes I understood it, and sometimes I did not. I presented documents and translations and brought friends to help. After a year and a half, I now handle matters independently and have learned some Hindi words. (Participant 1)

This narrative shows that resilience is rooted in persistence, adaptability, and self-efficacy. The student faced language barriers and used translations, digital tools, and peer support to facilitate communication. Over time, they managed situations independently and learned the local language, demonstrating that resilience developed through experience and effort. These experiences demonstrate that resilience among international students is a dynamic process that involves adaptation, self-awareness, and growth. This is supported by the findings of Bastien et al. (2018), Vanchinkhuu and Shin (2023), and Rujipak and Limprasert (2016), which suggest that longer stays facilitate students' adjustment to and acceptance of differences over time.

RQ2: To what extent do perceived social support and length of stay influence academic adjustment in international students?

A mediation analysis was conducted to investigate whether duration of stay mediates the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment among international students. The findings (Table 2) revealed that the indirect effect of perceived social support on academic adjustment through duration of stay was not statistically significant ($H_{02}: \beta = -0.00014, t = -0.06, p > 0.05$), indicating that duration of stay does not significantly mediate this relationship. However, the direct effect of perceived social support on academic adjustment was statistically significant and positive ($H_{01}: \beta = 0.262, t = 11.53, p$

< .001), implying that students reporting higher levels of perceived social support tend to demonstrate superior academic adjustment. The total effect, which includes both direct and indirect effects, was also statistically significant (H_{03} : $\beta = 0.261$, $t = 11.47$, $p < .001$). Nevertheless, the proportion of the total effect mediated by duration of stay was merely 0.05%, suggesting that the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment is predominantly direct, accounting for 99.95%. These results indicate that although social support plays a crucial role in the academic adjustment of international students, the duration of residence in the host country does not significantly impact this relationship.

Table 2: Mediation analysis showing that stay duration is a mediator between perceived social support and academic adjustment

Effect	Label	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval			Z	p	% Medi- ation
			SE	Lower	Upper			
Indirect	a × b	-1.39e-4	0.00218	-0.00440	0.00412	-0.06	0.95	0.05
Direct	c	0.26	0.02269	0.21708	0.30602	11.53	< .00	99.95
Total	c + a × b	0.26	0.02279	0.21674	0.30608	11.47	< .00	100

The results of the path estimates, as presented in Table 3, substantiate the mediation model previously outlined. The direct pathway from perceived social support to academic adjustment was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < .001$), whereas the pathways involving the duration of stay were not significant ($\beta = -0.00024$, $p = .949$ for social support → duration; $\beta = 0.581$, $p = .199$ for duration → adjustment). These findings align with the mediation analysis results and support the conclusion that the influence of perceived social support on academic adjustment is primarily direct.

Hypothesized Relationships

H_{01} . Perceived social support has no significant predictive value for academic adjustment among international students in India. (*Rejected*)

H_{02} . The duration of stay does not significantly mediate the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment among international students in India. (*Accepted*)

H_{03} . Perceived social support does not have a statistically significant total effect (direct + indirect) on academic adjustment among international students in India. (*Rejected*)

Table 3: Path coefficients for the mediation model, with stay duration mediating the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment

		Label	95% Confidence Interval				Z	p
			Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper		
Social Support	Duration of Stay	a	-2.39e-4	374	-0.0075	0.0070	0.06	0.95
Duration of Stay	Academic Adjustment	b	0.58	0.45	-0.3056	1.4685	1.28	0.19
Social Support	Academic Adjustment	c	0.26	0.02	0.2170	0.3060	11.5	<.00
				269			3	

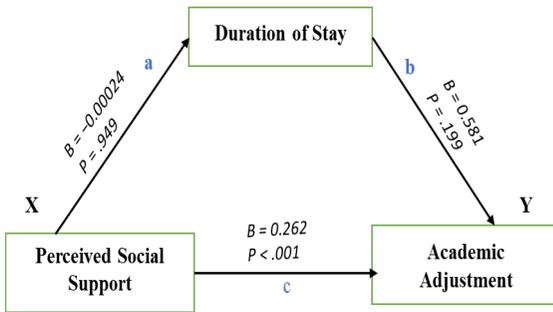


Figure 2: Path coefficient diagram illustrating the relationships among perceived social support, duration of stay, and academic adjustment.

Note: Path coefficients are standardized. The direct effect ($\beta = 0.262, p < .001$) was statistically significant. The indirect effect through duration of stay was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.00024, p = .949$). The total effect was also statistically significant ($\beta = 0.261, p < .001$), suggesting that the relationship is predominantly direct.

DISCUSSION

This mixed-method research examines how international students in India display resilience and adapt academically, guided by Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Resilience differs across cultures; in India, factors such as collectivism, family expectations, societal focus on academics, and limited institutional support shape students’ coping mechanisms (Akanwa, 2015; Shinde & Lee, 2020). These aspects were also considered in the studies by Bansal and Kapur (2023) and Butu et al. (2023). When external support is lacking, students rely on themselves, utilizing psychological defense mechanisms such as self-regulation, self-reliance, and self-management, or adopting a goal-oriented approach to build resilience (Jing & Kim, 2021; Artuch-Garde et al., 2017; Ding, 2024).

Here, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences, particularly within the underexplored context of Indian higher education. The qualitative results specifically revealed that

institutional structures and peer networks within the microsystem play key roles in shaping students' experiences, a finding supported by previous research conducted by Ma et al. (2023), Singh (2021), Amol et al. (2025), and Pawar and Dasgupta (2024). Roberts and Dunworth (2012) also argued that service providers for international students should better align with students' expectations and focus more on their actual needs to improve their satisfaction levels with the international services experience. These immediate support systems help students overcome academic and cultural challenges. Additionally, when external support is lacking, students develop self-reliance as a coping strategy, which in turn builds internal resilience and enhances their ability to adapt to new academic settings. This interaction, characteristic of the mesosystem, involves the relationships among various microsystems, such as institutions and peer groups, that influence students' overall adjustment to their environment.

Building on the in-depth insights generated during the qualitative phase, the quantitative phase aimed to examine the relationship between perceived social support and academic adjustment, with particular attention given to the mediating role of duration of stay. Employing a quantitative approach enabled the empirical testing of these relationships across a larger, more diverse sample, thereby enhancing the study's generalizability and providing a robust extension of the qualitative findings. The results showed that social support has a significant, direct positive effect on academic adjustment, highlighting the importance of relationships within the microsystem. These findings are supported by Pawar and Dasgupta (2024) and AlJuboori et al. (2025), who reported that social support from peers or institutions is a strong predictor of student adjustment compared with other factors. The length of stay, which is linked to developmental changes, did not significantly mediate this relationship. Lawani et al.'s (2012) findings also showed that the duration of stay does not significantly affect international students' adjustment experience. Usually, stay duration is considered a predictor of adjustment, making this result unexpected (Bastien et al., 2018; Rujipak & Limprasert, 2016). This suggests that although time in the host country may influence cultural adaptation or social integration, it does not substantially alter the impact of social support on academic performance. On the basis of Bronfenbrenner's framework, the study described students' academic adjustment as a dynamic process influenced not only by personal traits, such as resilience but also by layered environmental factors, particularly at the microsystem and mesosystem levels. The absence of mediation by time-related factors highlights the importance of immediate environmental influences over time or macrolevel elements, with a focus on the potential for institutional intervention.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study's main limitation is the exclusion of other factors when examining the impact of stay duration on outcomes. Future research should investigate various stay types and adjustment factors, as stay duration alone does not accurately predict academic adjustment. The small sample size, collected through snowball sampling and purposive sampling across India, limits generalizability; a larger,

more diverse study, including regions such as North, South, East, and West India, is needed. Resilience was identified as a key factor influencing adjustment in the qualitative analysis, but its significance requires validation through quantitative data. Future research should also consider resilience, self-efficacy and self-reliance as predictors of academic performance.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the importance of creating supportive environments, both at the institutional and personal levels, to increase the academic success and well-being of international students in India, a country characterized by diverse and dynamic cultural factors. Regardless of how long they stay, strong social support remains crucial for their academic adaptation. Many students in the qualitative phase reported feelings of isolation and inadequate support, with one noting, “All I have is myself,” which highlights the emotional vulnerability associated with limited social or institutional backing. This isolation can threaten both academic success and mental well-being. Perceived social support from domestic students (Brunsting et al., 2019) and implementing experiential classroom activities that encourage social interaction among both international and domestic students can enhance international students’ sense of belonging and social connectedness (Amol et al., 2025; Bastien et al., 2018). These insights provide valuable guidance for universities and policymakers seeking to enhance the international student experience through targeted, inclusive support strategies.

Ethical approval

Each party received a formal consent form before the interview.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests.

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