

Problems and Challenges of Medical English Language Education in Kyrgyzstan

Zulfiia Tulkunovna Radzhapova¹, Ayaz Farhin²

¹MD, Ph.D., Associate Professor of the Department of Therapy №2 Specialty “General Medicine”, Medical Faculty of the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

²MD, Graduate of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

ABSTRACT

The article delves into the challenges international medical students in Kyrgyzstan face, particularly in English-language-based programs. With a surge in demand for medical education in the country, the article explores the conventional and unconventional factors affecting the experiences of these students. It addresses issues such as the difficulty of adapting to an unfamiliar education system, external factors complicating adaptation, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study based on narratives from 250 international medical students, highlights the challenges of transitioning to life in Kyrgyz higher education. It emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive student body organization and fostering inclusivity between international and local students. In conclusion, this article aims to call for reforms and improvements to enhance their educational and personal experiences. It highlights the need for collaboration with experts to ensure a stronger education system and improved student support.

Keywords: adaptation, COVID-19 impact, international students, Kyrgyz Republic, medical education.

INTRODUCTION

Why is there an exceptional sense of overwhelming strain among the international students who arrive in Kyrgyzstan? How do we discern the conventional and unconventional factors regulating the experiences and education of English course medical students?

The aim of our study is to find answers to the following questions:

Without a doubt, higher international education in Kyrgyzstan has grown exponentially. Medical education in the country is becoming ever-popular among international students. With such skyrocketing demands come great responsibilities and expectations. All of which are being tackled incredibly. However, the potential that the medical education system holds for English-speaking international students, is much greater than it's being realized and fulfilled. The purpose of this article based on the mentioned theme is solely for the benefit of both, the current and future international medical students but also local medical students studying in an internationalized environment, and the medical educators who teach both in English and Russian language.

There are certain aspects of the international medical student experience within English language-based education that are unsatisfactory. By working to understand the international student perspective in this setting, we can seek, tackle, and improve these issues.

Some issues addressed in this article are:

- Why does adapting to an unaccustomed education system turn out more vexing than anticipated among such applicants?
- External factors which amplify problems in adaptation among the students.
- Implications imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Development of a possible support system and certain improvements.

Purpose of the article

This article focuses on the English-language-based medical program which is downright remarkable and opens up a door of opportunities to many international students. Moreover, the program provides a great opportunity to grow stronger and improvise reaching new heights for future doctors and faculty's overall development.

Studying experiences, the international students garnered in this system, have brought into light possible areas of development and filled the existing loopholes with an impetus for a higher, enriching quality of education and lifestyle. Kyrgyzstan is increasingly becoming one of the most popular destinations for international students with higher international student enrolments in medical education worldwide. This is thought in part to relate to the quality and reputation of higher education provision here.

Our qualitative study on the experiences of undergraduate international medical students in the environment of Kyrgyz medical universities reflects the high esteem in which international students hold medical education in this country specifically. We look to examine and demonstrate whether those expectations are met within the reported experiences of international medical students. The purpose of this article with the reported theme reflects the need to add to the limited literature on experience for international students studying a professional English-based program in medicine.

Research method

For this article, 250 international medical students actively participated and recounted their experiences and views. Participating international students hail from Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. Their narratives have been formulated comparatively and mapped out in this article.

DISCUSSION

As set out above, this study looks to investigate the experiences of international medical students in an English-language higher medical education environment, and this investigation focuses in particular on their transition into Kyrgyz higher education. We aimed to capture the true experience of international medical students, particularly their experience of the transition from starting university to adapting to life and study in the Kyrgyz Republic. Therefore, we decided to employ the following primary question: *How do international medical students experience the transition to life in Kyrgyz higher medical education?*

We chose to focus on the transition that international medical students make when beginning a study in the undergraduate medical course. As final-year medical students, we are involved with many other medical students, thus we are aware that this is a time of the most intensive change and adjustment. It is the time when international students must grapple with living in Kyrgyzstan, often for the first time in a country outside of their own. They must also adjust to studying an English language medical course in the universities of Kyrgyzstan, which for medical students includes familiarizing themselves not only with the academic but also the professional requirements of the course. In addition, from the outset of the course, medical students must cope with being on placement in healthcare settings away from the University. If it is possible to help international medical students navigate this early part of the course, then a significant step in improving the student experience will have been taken.

Some of the problems faced by the majority of the students have been described in figure 1.

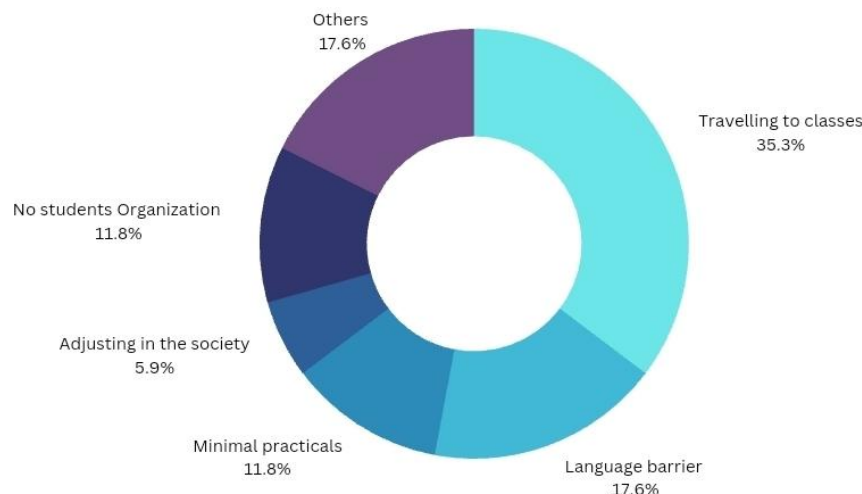


Fig. 1. The problems faced by the majority of the students

As demonstrated above, due to many reasons adapting to higher levels of autonomy and applying resource-management strategies are no easy feat for students.

Specifically elaborating on some problems, traveling for classes all over the city of Bishkek is a massive shock for international students who were never exposed to such a system in their countries such as India, Pakistan, Korea,

Jordan, Egypt, etc. This process is extremely time-consuming in an already time deficit program such as medicine. The struggle of riding various public buses for almost every class is draining especially during rush hours, sometimes without a place to stand comfortably. Rude fellow passengers, constant alertness against pickpocketing, and the lack of adequate airflow within the transport are issues not to shy away from.

Another obvious yet quite demanding factor is a cultural and language reset. Facing an entirely new concept of lifestyle from scratch is vexing to any student moving from countries. A fact well understood is that stepping out of our comfort zones is a challenge in itself. Combining it with exposure to a fresh and new concept of Kyrgyzstan, its abundant resources for the students, and the culture it holds, along with the gruesome and demanding course that the study of medicine is, subjugates even the quickest adaptive learners, especially augmented among those who have never ventured anywhere beyond their district or state.

Lesser availability of traditional food products and ingredients, catering to the many vegetarian and vegan international students in a meat-eating prevalent society, also tends to be difficult to get used to for several students.

For most international students English is their first or second language, however, that is not the case in Kyrgyzstan where the majority of the population is well-versed in Russian and Kyrgyz. This poses quite a hurdle initially in terms of communication, lodging, facilitating groceries and food, traveling, and even within the university campus. Learning a new language is a slow-burn process that requires dedication which results in slow acclimatization among the students.

A possibility of assistance could be assigning the new students to a regular proficient senior from Kyrgyzstan. This could help new students to better understand the culture, adaptation process, and exposure through a native, unfiltered source. Furthermore, resource management strategies, such as effort regulation and time management as well as intrinsic motivation, have been found to be positively associated with academic adjustments.

Another aberrant emerging challenge is a threat to security and the feeling of being unwelcome. Like many other famous medical hotspot countries such as the US, UK, and Canada, affiliation with a broadening community of international students is seen with a rise in notorious activities based on the individual's color, appearance, and cultural lifestyle. While some foreign communities are welcomed with arms wide open, some are unabashedly given multiple glances often garnering a view as a simple financial asset to them. The rise in theft and daylight robbery invading apartments and public spaces instills fear in many students' minds. However help from the same people of Kyrgyzstan is what keeps the international students feeling safer, indicating that this country is also adapting to the sudden massive influx of students.

Leap in the Academic and educational system. The English-language-based medical curriculum is an excellent program encompassing expertise in all areas, but is an all-new program; the system of daily evaluation, modules, and semester-end exams. Given the individual differences in self-regulation and learning, students might respond differently to the new system. While some students adapt early on, some require a longer time to get used to the drastic change which may get worse with homesickness, inability to adapt to the climatic difference, and other external issues.

Focusing on the academic system, some key highlights are being mentioned. Unlike home-based students of Kyrgyzstan, International students study integrated general science subjects during high school and need to re-learn them after joining the program, lengthening the course duration considering the fact the medical program in their countries are 4-5 years in contrast to the 6-year learning program of Kyrgyzstan.

Every country requires a screening examination after they return back to their home countries. It would prove to be better if students could save an extra year and prepare better for the test and start their internship. Universities can provide additional classes by a faculty well versed to prepare for the examination for Indian students which would set a great milestone.

Some Universities which have a large number of students, also need to refocus on the diverted attention per student count, on every professor. Such a demanding number of students also requires an addition to the already existing remarkable faculty.

They can also introduce a system such as a web portal or a public bulletin for international students which could help the faster spread of notices and circulars addressed to them regarding academic or extracurricular activities ensuring efficient networking which helps both the students and administration.

International students who come to study abroad have an ambition of carrying out their postgraduate studies in Kyrgyzstan and countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, etc. The English-based course catering to us, young students, could transition into an even better-internationalized ambiance in terms of subjects, such as English, and the clinical approach. Readily available information sources, books, and study spaces.

Hands-on clinical practice is a pressing matter of concern among all international students. They are accustomed to a wider exposure practically and learning various skills. Many medical programs are based on clinical rotations starting from the 2nd year of the program gradually getting the medical students used to the hospital system. Basic practical skills are also taught during the entire course starting with dummies and graduating to experiences with patients. All this, however, is not included in the English-language-based study which leaves the students apprehensive after graduation, moving on to higher platforms.

There is also a need for a student-advice-support system and a student body Organization which helps out international students transition smoothly into the Kyrgyz system and build a rapport with them. The introduction of such councils will be immensely impactful since it will result in more cooperation from students who tend to head-on and also from those who stay behind the curtains. A comfortable group can help them gain confidence and assist with various struggles of getting around.

Foreign students come to Kyrgyzstan not only with hopes and expectations of a high-quality education but also a colorful and diverse university experience. The inclusivity of international students with the resident students would enrich their acquaintances. Holding various sports events, different club activities, Olympiads, and cultural festivals with participation from both resident and foreign students will foster the development of good bonds between them and gift life-lasting memories.

The emergence of COVID-19 and shift in the educational approach.

The pandemic which followed in 2019 was an event uncalled for. Massive changes had to be implied in every public structure of society. During the pandemic, all universities in Kyrgyzstan had a sudden shift from face-to-face to emergency remote education. Students were forced to study online, with limited access to facilities and less contact with peers and teachers, while at the same time being exposed to more autonomy.

Every student had to now re-adapt to the new remote learning system. Students reported being less able to regulate their attention, effort, and time and found themselves less motivated compared to the pre-crisis situations; moreover, they reported investing more time into self-study. It was initially a challenge getting used to the new method of learning while also keeping up with the syllabus. Most international students returned to their home countries and continued with their education online for a year. The situation had its pros and cons.

They had a better opportunity to focus on aspects of self-regulated learning, time management, and attention regulation but emotional and external factors heavily weighed them down. Distractions from home reduced social interaction, and external stress. Anxiety also affected the quality of learning. Adapting to the situation, understanding resource-management strategies, and intrinsic motivation pushed them forward.

However, the international students returned to in-class education much later than their home-based peers in Kyrgyzstan. Re-adaptation and re-transitioning were a challenge once more to many students.

CONCLUSION

The international experience of medical students is a subject less talked about. Hence we've attempted to showcase more of their challenges in adhering to the theme.

The massive expansion and recognition of the English-based medical program in Kyrgyzstan is proof of its ever-growing capacity. As the influx of students increases, an overall check must also be regularly performed to sustain the quality of lifestyle and education.

As we've all traveled through the milestones of troubles faced by these students, we can confidently say that the journey has been worthwhile and will bring about the changes required.

The sole purpose of this study has been diving more into pressing matters of international students, getting to know and address their concerns, and exploring opportunities to further enhance the international student experience. Appreciating the presence of errors is only a means of acknowledging the obstacles which would aid in renovating the foundation to a stronger education system.

This article is intended to unite and contemplate ideas of reform and restructuring which surely can be handled best with the several experts of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Conflict of interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.



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