

The Myth of the Monolith: Acculturation Stress and Mental Health Outcomes Among Foreign African Students in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract: Intracontinental student mobility driven by the African Union's Agenda 2063 has made Kenya a key destination for African students. This study contends that the so-called "myth of monolith" – the belief in a unified African identity – mistakenly presumes seamless cultural and psychological transitions. Instead, this myth heightens acculturation stress and worsens mental health outcomes among Foreign African Students (FAS) in Kenyan higher education. This study employed a narrative review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025. A search of digital databases identified 124 articles. Of these, only 6 met the inclusion criteria for qualitative synthesis and interpretation. The findings indicate that foreign African students experience significant acculturation stress, primarily due to language barriers, culture shock, and perceived discrimination. The existing evidence challenges the "monolith myth" by demonstrating that stress levels vary significantly across individuals, regardless of age, marital status, or education level. Based on these findings, the study concludes that most Foreign African Students arrive in Kenya with limited emotional and psychological preparedness for the challenges of cultural transition, which increases their vulnerability to the effects of cultural distance within academic institutions. To mitigate these challenges, the study recommends implementing peer-based support systems, including community networks, to provide essential coping mechanisms that buffer against depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

Keywords: Intra-African Migration, Acculturation Stress, Mental Health, Foreign African Students, International African Students, Kenyan Higher Education.

1. Introduction

The higher education sector is undergoing a significant transformation, particularly in patterns of student mobility. Historically, the international education narrative has been dominated by "South-to-North" migration, with many African students pursuing academic opportunities in American and European universities. In response to the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the growing ethos of Pan-Africanism, a new trend of intra-continental mobility has emerged (Akinola & Matlosa, 2025; Wapmuk, 2021). Increasingly, students from across Africa are seeking academic credentials in other African countries. Within this "South-South" exchange, Kenya has established itself as a central educational hub, attracting

thousands of foreign African students from across the continent's West, South, and Central regions.

This article contends that, despite growing optimism about continental integration, foreign African students (FAS) in Kenya face psychological challenges that undermine expectations of seamless adaptation. These students, as Richardson (2022) notes, often meet the assumption of a single, unified African identity - a "myth of monolith" - when attending universities in cities like Nairobi or Mombasa. Such assumptions conflate Africa's shared boundaries with uniformity, overlooking its social, linguistic, and psychological diversity. This perspective aligns with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's critique of the "single story of Africa," which oversimplifies this diverse, modern, and agentic continent (Villanova, 2018). The persistent belief that geographic proximity ensures psychological and social similarity leads to the expectation that students from Ghana, Nigeria, or the Democratic Republic of Congo will easily adapt to Kenya solely because of a shared African identity.

A. *The Proximity Paradox and Acculturation Stress*

The core argument is that the myth of a unified African identity leads to a psychological "proximity paradox" that intensifies adjustment challenges. Here, the proximity paradox means that, because they share a continental identity, foreign students expect cultural similarity. This expectation hides real differences (Kolb, 2013; Marifath et al., 2025;). As a result, students may not prepare for cultural adjustment as they would for a South-North transition. This leaves them vulnerable to acculturation stress when unexpected differences arise. As Pérez-Rojas and Gelso (2020) note, "cultural distance" - the degree of difference between students' home and host cultures - is a major source of stress. Underestimating this distance, due to proximity or perceived similarity, heightens stress in intracontinental student migration. Many foreign African students in Kenya enter a "psychological no-man's-land" (Richardson, 2022). They are not considered sufficiently foreign for specialized orientation like Western expatriates, but they are also not sufficiently local to adapt easily to Kenya's psychosocial environment. Acute acculturation stress can lead

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to mental health challenges, especially as students try to adapt culturally while meeting academic demands in higher education.

Acculturation stress refers to the psychological effects of adapting to a foreign culture. For foreign African students in Kenya, this stress intensifies when expectations based on the myth of the monolith are unmet - an idea central to this analysis. Moreover, Iorga *et al.* (2020) argue that acculturation stress is more than “homesickness”; it involves a profound negotiation of identity. When students expect pan-African unity but instead face cultural differences such as linguistic exclusion or regional xenophobia (often termed Afrophobia), the results can be mental health crises (Kristiana *et al.*, 2022; Koo *et al.*, 2021; Arabian & Rahiminezhad, 2018). While existing research has linked chronic acculturation stress to anxiety, alienation, and depression, mainly in the South-North context, the outcomes of intra-African cultural transitions remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need to address the psychological impact discussed above.

B. Problem Statement

Although existing research has examined the struggles of the African diaspora in the Global North, the “South-South” experience remains a largely overlooked area within academic discourse. Kenyan institutions of higher learning often assume that integration for foreign African students occurs automatically. Consequently, these institutions lack culturally responsive psychosocial support systems tailored to students from other African countries. In practice, many foreign African students encounter the proximity paradox, in which anticipated cultural similarities give way to significant differences. This cultural distance is evident in linguistic isolation, such as the predominance of Swahili and Sheng, divergent social etiquette, and distinct dietary practices that undermine the sense of a “home away from home.”

Furthermore, despite the increasing presence of foreign African students in Kenya, mental health research continues to focus predominantly on the “Global South-to-North” migration pathway. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical studies examining the effects of intra-continental acculturation stress on mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, social alienation, and depression, among these students. In the absence of proper understanding of psychosocial predictors, Kenyan institutions of higher learning continue to employ uniform support structures that do not address the specific vulnerabilities of FAS. This article seeks to address this gap by challenging the notion of cultural homogeneity and highlighting the distinct psychological challenges associated with intra-African cultural transitions among students in Kenya.

2. Literature Review

Studies on international student migration often focus on ‘cultural distance’, a term coined by Babiker *et al.* (1980) to describe cultural differences between societies. Yet, in Africa, this approach requires looking beyond traditional “North-South” views and consider models better suited to these migrations. This review examines theories of acculturation and

social factors shaping the experiences of foreign African students in Kenyan universities.

A. Berry's Model of Acculturation

John Berry's (1997) Acculturation Model is the main theoretical framework for this study. The model argues that individuals encountering a new culture adopt one of four strategies, based on how they balance their original identity with the host culture. These are: integration, retaining the home culture while interacting with the host culture; assimilation, abandoning the home culture for the host culture; separation, maintaining the home culture and avoiding the host culture; and marginalization, losing contact with both cultures (Juang & Syed, 2019; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022; Ward, 2020). These cultural adoption strategies are key to determining acculturation outcomes. These outcomes determine competence in adapting to and interacting with the host country's mainstream culture, as well as in managing stressors there.

Berry's Model, as a primary psychological framework, helps us understand the challenges foreign African students face between their home and host cultures. Many scholars have explored acculturation, with most studies focused on migration to the Global North. Studies show students are often psychologically prepared for cultural differences (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022; Ward, 2020; Githiora, 2018). In South-South contexts, the 'myth of monolith' emerges, where geographical proximity is thought to flatten cultural diversity. As a result, African host institutions assume cultural similarity and expect foreign African students to assimilate easily. This frames integration as compulsory assimilation rather than multicultural inclusion (Juang & Syed, 2019). For example, Kenyan universities treat students from Congo, Rwanda, and Nigeria as culturally similar to one another. This restricts their ability to express their individual cultural identities. Consequently, these students often face pressure to assimilate, which weakens agency and fosters social marginalization. This may result in depression, anxiety, and academic struggles.

B. The Proximity Paradox and Cultural Distance

The existing literature consistently associates greater cultural distance with higher acculturation stress. For instance, students moving from Kenya to China are often expected to experience significant stressors due to cultural differences, including language, dietary patterns, and lifestyle. However, recent findings introduce the concept of the “proximity paradox.” In this phenomenon, students in intracontinental migration expect minimal cultural differences when moving to other African countries (Richardson, 2022; He & Fei, 2025). As a result, they often arrive in the host country unprepared for socio-cultural differences and ill-prepared psychologically to deal with possible acculturation stressors. When they subsequently encounter significant friction that contravenes their expectations, the resulting psychological shock becomes intense. This framing helps explain why, for foreign African students at Kenyan universities, cultural differences often manifest as hidden friction points. For example, language

barriers are a main source of exclusion (Neto & Neto, 2025). Although English is widely spoken in Africa, Swahili and Sheng (Kenyan urban slang) often create social barriers in Kenya, especially for students accustomed to English or French (Githiora, 2018). This shift makes navigating a Swahili-heavy environment difficult, which may result in social exclusion for foreign African students.

Moreover, social differences are another important source of cultural friction. Contrary to assumptions of a uniform “African social temperament,” studies show real differences in communication styles and social expectations. For instance, Kenyan society often values indirect communication and social reserve (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Richardson, 2022), whereas cultures in West Africa, such as Ghana and Nigeria, prioritize directness, assertiveness, and visible confidence. This difference can lead Kenyan hosts to misinterpret West African students’ behavior as arrogance rather than mere cultural difference (He & Fei, 2025; Symons, 2025), requiring foreign students to monitor their behavior closely to avoid negative judgments, increasing their cognitive and emotional stress.

C. *Acculturation Stress and Mental Health Outcomes*

Acculturation stress refers to the physiological and psychological responses to an individual’s life changes resulting from a transition between cultures. Kristiana *et al.* (2022) note that, for international students, this stress appears as social alienation, discrimination, and homesickness. Building on these findings, research (Kim *et al.*, 2025; Soufi Amlashi *et al.*, 2024; Koo *et al.*, 2021) demonstrates a positive correlation between these stressors and clinical mental health outcomes. As a result, prolonged exposure to a hostile or indifferent cultural environment can elevate cortisol levels, leading to cognitive fatigue. Furthermore, Thela *et al.* (2017) add that, for intra-African students, acculturation stress is heightened by “Afrophobia,” a distinct xenophobia among Africans toward other Africans. Many foreign African students traveling within Africa, for example, to Kenya, expect “Pan-African brotherhood,” but instead face regional stereotypes and pressure to assimilate. These disruptions can be traced to the unexpected psychological betrayal, which increases the risk of anxiety and depressive disorders and subsequently impairs academic performance and overall well-being.

D. *The Gap in Intra-African Research*

Although research on international student mobility is proliferating, most empirical studies focus on migration from the “Global South” to the “Global North,” often presuming that acculturation stress is unique to students moving from African nations to European or American universities (Kim *et al.*, 2025; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Koo *et al.*, 2021). This narrow view leaves a significant gap in scholarship on intra-African student mobility. Migration scholars frequently employ the Cultural Distance Index as a framework for assessing acculturation stress, particularly in North-South contexts. While it quantifies perceived cultural variance between home and host cultures in inter-continental migration, this method often overlooks the significant regional cultural diversity within Africa.

Consequently, many studies treat “Sub-Saharan Africa” as culturally homogenous, disregarding distinctions among groups such as the Kenyan Gikuyu or Luo, and the Nigerian Igbo (Dolat, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2025; Koo *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, although studies such as Masenya (2017), Addae and Quan-Baffour (2022), and Cross and Cross (2020) have explored “Afrophobia” in South Africa, little qualitative research has examined the psychological impacts of regional stereotyping and social marginalization in East African hubs such as Kenya. This study addresses that gap by investigating the acculturation stressors experienced by foreign African students relocating to Kenya for education.

3. Methodology

The study used a narrative review of peer-reviewed literature published from 2020 to 2025. Secondary data were sourced from digital databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, and PhD theses, to explore acculturation stress and mental health outcomes among foreign African students. The literature search included abstracts and full-text articles. Keywords used in the literature search included: ‘acculturation stress’ AND ‘mental health,’ ‘mental health’ OR ‘depression,’ ‘acculturation stress’ AND ‘psychological distress,’ ‘mental health’ AND ‘international students,’ and ‘international African students’ OR ‘foreign African.’ Each keyword combination was systematically applied to identify relevant literature on acculturation stress and mental health outcomes among foreign African student populations. This approach helped streamline the research problem from global, regional, and local perspectives. Of 124 articles identified, 6 were included in the review. The other 118 did not meet the inclusion criteria.

Articles and documents used in this study were chosen only if they satisfied the inclusion criteria. Specifically, those published between 2020 and 2025, documents addressing psychosocial or cultural adaptation experiences among foreign students, and focusing on non-Kenyan African students, studies written in English, and articles focusing on African international students. Exclusion criteria included studies not written in English, articles published more than 5 years ago, studies not specific to acculturation stress and mental health among international students, studies not specifying their research design, and articles whose populations were not international students. The findings from these studies were qualitatively synthesized, interpreted, and discussed. The study provided implications for international students in Kenya, including interventions to enhance the acculturation of foreign African students in Kenyan universities.

4. Results

While international students bring cultural diversity to host countries, they often face numerous challenges as they struggle to adapt to their new environments. Unlike domestic students, they usually experience acculturation stress and associated mental health issues as they navigate the new lifestyles, culture, social customs, and academic systems in a foreign country. Globally, evidence suggests that students struggle with the

challenges of acculturation stress, including language barriers, isolation, and a sense of loneliness, which expose them to various forms of mental health outcomes (Soufi Amlashi *et al.*, 2024). For instance, in a recent systematic review and meta-analysis, the correlation analysis revealed that acculturation stress contributes to higher negative psychological outcomes, especially depression.

Beyond depression, other negative effects of acculturative stress among international students included alcohol abuse, anxiety, symptoms of mental health, and psychological distress. Importantly, the study also revealed that acculturative stress contributes to a decline in positive psychological consequences, including emotional adjustment and mental health. Complementing these findings, a cross-sectional survey exploring levels of acculturative stress and associated factors among Asian and African international students in China reported significantly lower levels of stress (Gyasi-Gyamerah *et al.*, 2024). In this survey, African students indicated higher levels primarily due to perceived discrimination, culture shock, and homesickness, while Asians associated their stress levels with fear and guilt (Ngwira *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, the study revealed that students who have stayed longer in the host country, are married, possess a higher educational status, and are older experience lower acculturation stress, suggesting these factors act as protective factors against acculturative stress.

An interpretative phenomenological study in Ghana revealed that some of the primary causes of acculturative stress among international students include financial issues stemming from being unrealistically perceived as affluent, making them easy targets for exploitation by host students (Gyasi-Gyamerah *et al.*, 2024). The study further showed that international students experienced language barriers, especially when seeking basic services, such as taxis, and when interacting with traders. In the same study, sudden changes in academic schedules, weather conditions, and differential treatment by local students further expose foreign students to distress (Adeyoyin, 2024). A qualitative study examining the acculturation journey of African international students found that acculturation stress, including culture shock and language barriers, significantly impacts their psychological well-being and creates challenges in navigating academic and internship opportunities (Muganga *et al.*, 2025). However, evidence consistently shows that access to strong peer networks and supervisor support is noted as an effective coping strategy that contributes to better student satisfaction. A similar qualitative study on the impact of informal communication support on acculturation stress among international African students found that students prefer peer-based community networks as effective coping strategies, as they help preserve their emotional security and cultural familiarity while fostering social support among fellow Africans (Adeyoyin, 2024). Hence, according to the findings, informal support systems offer an effective coping strategy and act as a buffer against anxiety.

Another study examining the association between acculturation stress and mental health preparedness among pre-international students in Nigeria showed that the majority of

individuals experience high levels of stress and mental health conditions before they go to foreign countries. Hence, a significant section of African international students demonstrates low emotional readiness, with perceived fear of coping and navigating challenges in the host country, to limit their risk of being susceptible to acculturation stress (Jaiyeoba & Onwuama, 2025). This finding shows that the majority of international students often arrive in their host nations unprepared for the myriad of challenges that they will face, creating the need for intervention and effective coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, Mbuthia (2022) conducted a correlational study on psycho-social factors and depression among international students in Kenya. The findings showed that a significant section of the students experiences mild to minimal stress levels. It also revealed a correlation between financial situation and depression among the students, with an estimated 70% of the students reporting having suffered from low levels of acculturative stress. Additionally, the social support that international students receive was observed to have a negative association with depression and acculturative stress.

5. Discussion

A. Prevalence and Impact of Acculturation Stress

In most cases, international students thrive in host nations; however, studying abroad exposes them to significant challenges. The findings show that international students, especially those from Africa, are uniquely positioned to experience acculturation stress as they adapt to life in new cultures. They face issues like language barriers, discrimination, loneliness, and isolation. In Kenya, it is observed that a significant section of international students suffers from mild levels of acculturation stress. However, there is also a strong association between financial instability and depression among this group of students. This finding aligns with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) model, which holds that international students are exposed to numerous stressors in foreign nations beyond those of the hosts. They must navigate new academic systems and environments, and manage second-language anxiety. While domestic students deal with the normal academic pressure, international students face additional challenges that require them to navigate both psychological and sociological adjustment processes to effectively function in their new environment. These extra burden make it harder for them to completely avoid noticeable mental health issues.

B. Mental Health Outcomes and the Myth of the Monolith

The findings further demonstrate that African international students experience higher acculturation stress than students from other developed nations. This discrepancy is primarily attributed to perceived discrimination, including feelings of inferiority, direct verbal insults, overt interactions, covert acts, and sudden culture shock. These forms of discrimination often negatively impact students' acculturation process and, in most cases, contribute to overall poor psychological well-being and mental health outcomes, such as acculturation stress, anxiety

and depression. This argument aligns with Ward (2024) and reflects the perception of Berry's acculturation framework, specifically the risk of being marginalized or separated when students feel excluded by the host culture and norms. Moreover, the findings challenge the assumption of the 'monolith,' which holds that the acculturation stress that all international students experience is uniform and highly predictable. The results demonstrate that acculturation stress levels vary significantly across the student population, depending on factors such as age, marital status, and educational level. Additionally, Mbuthia (2022) found that while many international students in Kenya recorded low levels of stress, there was a strong positive correlation between the financial status of the students and depression. This association further asserts that the notion of international students being affluent can result in financial exploitation, subjecting them to the risk of mental health challenges.

C. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Support systems are critical element in influencing how international students adjust in host countries. These systems help reduce the risk of acculturation stress and mental health issues.

The findings show that peer-based community networks play a critical role in offering a buffer for foreign students against potential psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety. These outcomes support arguments by Smith and Khawaja (2011), noting that establishing a social support system aid in a successful psychological adjustment. Therefore, for foreign African students in Kenya, encouraging informal peer networks within the student population is critical in securing emotional stability in a new environment. As such, local universities should make deliberate efforts to recognize the different emotional readiness of international students, and implement necessary interventions to facilitate better integration. These efforts should allow the students to keep their cultural identity while actively participating in the host nation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

A. Conclusion

This study debunks the belief of the 'myth of the monolith,' that international students experience a uniform acculturation stress. The findings demonstrated that even though individuals share continental identity, it does not guarantee foreign African students (FAS) a seamless psychological adaptation in Kenya. As such, the intra-African mobility is significantly influenced by cultural, linguistic, and emotional variations, often obscured by the assumption of shared African identity. Hence, acculturation stress, the psychological impact of adapting to a new culture, varies significantly by individual expectations, financial status, and access to social support. When these international students arrive in Kenya, they are often expected to be emotionally ready to assimilate quickly. However, many face the 'proximity paradox,' in which the underestimated cultural distances, such as linguistic exclusion through Kiswahili, increases their risks of acculturation stress.

These challenges can lead to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, isolation, and anxiety. Despite the availability of peer social support systems, a large proportion of international students arrive with low emotional readiness, underscoring the need for more context-sensitive strategies to enhance student well-being.

B. Recommendations

Kenyan universities should go beyond uniform integration structures by implementing culturally sensitive psychosocial programs specifically designed to meet the distinct mental health and orientation needs of foreign African students from diverse regional backgrounds.

Learning institutions should create two tailored psychosocial readiness programs: one for pre-arrival and one for post-arrival. The pre-arrival program should help students develop emotional coping skills before they enter the new environment, while post-arrival program provides ongoing support to help them assimilate smoothly and reduce cultural friction.

Kenyan universities should formalize peer-based social networks focused on supporting new students and develop structured mentorship programs. These initiatives should provide strategies to address acculturation stress and promote emotional security.

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