

# The Impact of Multicultural Education on University Students' Mental Health Wellbeing

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**Abstract**—Recently, Kurdistan region has opened up to international students from around the world and special programs are being run by the Kurdish government to encourage international students to study in Kurdistan region universities. The well-being of international students studying in multicultural education settings has been a source of concern to stakeholders in education, as well as researchers. This study aims to analyze the impact of multicultural education on the mental well-being of international students in Kurdistan region universities. To achieve the aim of this study, the multicultural stress scale and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) were adopted into one questionnaire and applied to 120 international students that are studying in Kurdistan region universities. The collected data was analyzed using statistical methods. The researcher analyzed the WEMWBS scale with the approved WEMWBS score and compared it with the results of analysis using a statistical software package and the findings were similar. This study sets precedence as one of the first studies to analyze the mental well-being and stress factors in Kurdish universities, and one of the few studies to combine the multicultural stress scale and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) in this ongoing debate. The results of the study are beneficial to all stakeholders of education in Kurdistan region universities.

**Keywords**— Distress; mental wellbeing; multicultural education; multicultural stress; WEMWBS.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This document is a template for Microsoft *Word* versions 2003 or later. When you open the conference template, select “Page multicultural education is a concept that came into being around 1970 when the minority of the society demanded for the school curriculum changed to accommodate the minority and people from other cultures (Sleeter, 2018). Since then, several researchers have addressed the issue and described multicultural education in myriad ways. Educating immigrants in a multicultural way promotes integration (Aguado-Odina et al., 2017). According to Sleeter (2018), the most important aspect of multicultural education is dialogue and collaboration between groups that have different levels of power, especially on education issues, in which the more powerful listen to and collaborate with the less powerful.

It has been found that marginalized students perform higher on academic achievement measures, and is motivated, self-confident, and self-sufficient when their teachers are skilled in creating inclusive and equitable classrooms in multicultural education (Mahdavi et al., 2021). However, teachers are often underprepared to teach in multicultural classrooms after they complete teacher preparation programs, so high-quality professional development (PD) is essential in this area (Parkhouse, Lu & Massaro, 2019).

One major challenge of multicultural education is students' inability to adapt to multicultural school environments since they are accustomed to their cultures (Banks & Banks, 2019). The combined influence of teachers and other environmental factors can affect students who find themselves in a multicultural environment. Cultural intolerant environments may aggravate mental illness in multicultural settings (Liu, Feng, London & Zhang, 2022). If the right environment is not provided, the inability of students to adapt to multicultural environments can lead to more serious issues in their personality and mental health.

Recently, the number of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities has increased (Seidi, 2020). The total number of foreign students at tertiary institutions in Iraq according to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (N.D.) is 94,700. With the diversity among international students studying in Kurdistan region universities, coupled with the need to adapt to the language, culture, and environmental issues in Kurdistan region, it is expedient that the well-being of foreign students is analyzed.

### **Purpose of study**

Several researchers have studied how multicultural education affects students' mental well-being. However, there is no accessible research regarding the effect of multicultural education on foreign students' mental well-being in Kurdistan region. This study, therefore, intends to analyze the impact of multicultural education on the mental well-being of international students in Kurdistan region universities.

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1- Does multicultural educations have an effect on the stress levels of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities?

RQ2- Does multicultural educations affect the mental well-being of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities?

RQ3- Does stress in multicultural education lead to poor mental well-being among international students studying in Kurdistan region universities?

## Significance of study

Mental health is an important aspect of every human. The state of mind of an individual determines their success in their daily activities, as well as their interaction with the world and people around them. Well-being is especially important for students since the state of mind of students determine their success in academics. International students are the most vulnerable set of students worldwide. Several studies have considered how international students are exposed to stress factors that affect their academic achievements. Other studies also considered the mental well-being of international students. Some studies have also considered the effect of stress on the mental well-being of international students. However, these studies considered different samples and locations, other than Kurdistan region. This research intends to fill in the gap, by studying how stress influences mental well-being, in a multicultural educational environment, among international students in Kurdistan region universities. This study also sets precedence, by combining two scales of measurement that have been used separately by different researchers. The Multicultural distress Scale and the Mental Well-Being Scale have been used by researchers in the past, but those studies never combined the scales. Since this research addresses concepts that are measurable with these two scales, the researcher used these scales of measurement together. The findings of this study are important to the stakeholders of education in Kurdistan region since it would inform them about the welfare needs of international students in the country. This study also presents an additional method of measuring multicultural stress and mental well-being, with the introduction of the combination of the multicultural distress scale and mental well-being scale; this can be used by future researchers who intend to embark on a similar study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Multicultural education

According to Sleeter (2018), multicultural education is an educational system that is meant to accommodate diversity in students, such as their nationality, cultural differences, language differences, and race among other things. The concept of multicultural education has evolved, and several pedagogies have been developed to improve multiculturalism in education. Some of the pedagogy developed includes culturally responsive teaching by Gay (2002), and culturally sustaining pedagogy by Paris and Alim (2017).

In many countries, disparities between groups persist in the education system despite the efforts made to improve multicultural education. Most multicultural approaches involve adding a few ethnic minority figures or superficial aspects of diverse cultures to the curriculum (Parkhouse, Lu & Massaro, 2019). With this addition, however, there is a lack of understanding of cultural differences and simplistic stereotypes are encouraged instead. This is not surprising since the implementation of these multicultural approaches is left in the hands of teachers or educators who are not well versed with the diversity among students and have not received the appropriate training that would aid them in implementing

effective multicultural approaches in education (Parkhouse, Lu & Massaro, 2019; Tezera & Bekele, 2021).

In recent times, there is an increase in the number of minority students in universities. Multicultural education is meant to make minorities in society benefit from education. There is still a lot of work to do to improve academic outcomes among many diverse students. However, as it stands, there are many benefits and many disadvantages to multicultural education (Paris and Alim, 2017; Parkhouse, Lu & Massaro, 2019; Tezera & Bekele, 2021).

### Multicultural Stress of international students

International students are exposed to several situations that make them uncomfortable in their new environments. These environmental issues may pose a threat to their well-being especially when they find it difficult to adjust (Gil, 2021). When students from diverse backgrounds find themselves in non-diverse educational environments, the ability to adapt is at the minimum, hence causing psychological and physiological stress.

The distress caused by cultural differences is described as psychological or physiological discomfort caused by the discord, confusion, conflict, and discord experienced when living in a foreign environment (Gil, 2021). This stress of dealing with a non-diverse multicultural education environment is termed multicultural stress. International students are also faced with the issue of acculturation stress when they are required to assimilate into a different culture, other than their own culture (Jackson, Ray & Bybell, 2019; Al-Krenawi, Alotaibi & Elbedour, 2021).

Aside from the stress that comes from non-diverse cultural educational settings, most international students are faced with racial stress. Racial stress is when an individual feels psychological and physiological stress based on their presence among a race other than theirs. In this situation, international students feel they are not accepted by the people in their new environment. Research has found that racial stress affects students' self-esteem, academic achievements, and mental well-being (Torres-Harding, Torres & Yeo, 2020; AlAteeq, Aljhani & AlEesa, 2020; Gil, 2021).

Based on the above, the first hypothesis for this study is:

**H<sub>1</sub>**- Multicultural education increases the stress level of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities

### Effect of Multicultural education on mental wellbeing

Well-being includes having more positive feelings and fewer negative feelings. Mental well-being refers to the ability to recognize one's potential, cope with everyday stress, function efficiently, and contribute to society (Chahar Mahali, 2019; Aldalaykeh, Al-Hammouri & Rababah, 2019). It is a state of mind that makes the individual have a positive attitude toward life in general.

The rise in mental health conditions among university students has led to several studies and research. In a study by Bruffaerts, et al. (2018), it was advanced that between 12-50 percent of college students have mental disorders. The situation becomes worse when the said university student finds themselves in a mentally stressful environment, especially a non-diverse cultural environment.

An individual's well-being can be adversely affected by interactions between cultural groups and their environment in multicultural situations. Ethnic minority students are however reluctant to seek mental health services due to the stigma associated with a fear of judgment and mislabeling (Gil, 2018). In addition, cultural mistrust and fear of continuous racism and discrimination affect students' motivation to seek mental health services due to the lack of cultural diversity among mental health clinicians.

Based on the literature, the second hypothesis for this study is: **H<sub>2</sub>**- Multicultural education affects the mental well-being of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities.

### **The stress of multicultural education and mental wellbeing**

There has been a link between stress and several psychological and health outcomes, such as low self-esteem, concentration difficulties, intrusive thoughts, and an increased risk for mental and physical illnesses including anxiety and depression. It is possible to have a negative mental health outcome when you teach and interact with young people due to their emotionally demanding nature. As well, research suggests that universities that do not minimize multicultural stress do not benefit diverse students' mental health and academic outcomes (Gil, 2018).

The relationship between burnout and mental well-being has consistently been demonstrated by researchers (Torres-Harding, Torres & Yeo, 2020; Gil, 2021). Based on the literature, it was established that multicultural education affects mental well-being, causes stress among university students, and that stress has an effect on mental well-being. This study, therefore, proposes a third hypothesis is:

**H<sub>3</sub>**- Multicultural Stress impacts the mental well-being among international students studying in Kurdistan region universities

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study comprised current international students studying in Kurdistan region universities. There was a total of one hundred and twenty (120) participants in the survey that was conducted. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling methods. Females were the majority of participants, comprising 52.5% of the total participants, whereas male participants comprised 47.7%.

### **Materials**

Primary data was used for this study. The study used a survey method to collect data for this research. The study used a research questionnaire consisting of questions adopted from existing scales of measurement. The first section of the research questions consisted of demographic questions that were used to collect the gender information of the participants, the period they have been studying in Kurdistan region universities, as well as their fluency in the Kurdish language, which is one of the official languages of Kurdistan region. The scales adopted for the study are explained below: Multicultural distress Scale: The second section of the research questions consisted of multicultural stress-related

questions which addressed research question one and hypothesis one of this study. The multicultural stress scale was adapted from the Multicultural Distress Scale-Race (Turner, 2021). It consists of 12 questions that are used to measure how a minority individual feels in a majority culture environment. Mental Well-Being Scale: The third section of the research questionnaire addressed the mental well-being of international students studying in Kurdistan Universities. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) which was adopted from the study of Tennant et al. (2007) and demonstrated an internal reliability of .91 in the study of Tennant was used in this section. The scale consists of 14 mental well-being questions that capture the mental state of the participants. The third section helps to answer research questions two and three, as well as hypotheses two and three of this study.

### **Reliability test**

To check for the reliability of the scales, Cronbach's alpha was used. For the 26 attitude statements that were analyzed in the study, a Cronbach's alpha of .71 was reached (26 items;  $\alpha = .71$ ). According to the study of Sekaran (2013), Cronbach's alpha above .7 is acceptable in research in social sciences.

### **Procedure**

This study followed a correlational research design. The research collected data using a 29-question survey, consisting of 3 demographic questions and 26 attitude statements. The questionnaires were sent out to international students through their emails, social media, and other international student group forums. The questionnaire was sent through a google form link. The participants were expected to open the link and fill in the form on google. Google form then gathered the responses which were then downloaded and analyzed. One hundred and fifty messages were sent; however, 120 responses were received.

### **Ethical consideration**

The participants in this study were protected from being publicly identified. This was done by hiding their identity. They are identified by numbers rather than their names. The google forms that were sent out did not collect their emails or any means of personal identification hence, they were assured of their identities not being revealed. Furthermore, the survey included a consent form that informed the participants about the study's purpose as well as how the data collected would be used.

Regarding the scales of measurements that were used, they are scales that are existent in the public domain that did not require special permissions to be sought before usage. Hence, there was no need to seek special permission to use them. References were however made to the original owners of the scales.

### **Statistical Analysis**

This study used a quantitative data analysis method to analyze the collected data. Percentages were used, excel was also used to get the scores for the WEMWBS scale and SPSS statistical package, and version 29 was used to analyze the hypothesis and to test for the reliability and correlation of the scales of

measurement and variables. The statistical analysis of the collected data included a correlational analysis and a linear regression analysis.

**Measurements**

There were two variables in the study:

Multicultural distress was the independent variable. The study sought to explain how this variable affects the mental well-being of students. This variable is also referred to as MSS.

Mental well-being was the dependent variable. This study sought to establish that multicultural education in Kurdistan region universities has an effect on mental well-being and that stress mediates the relationship between multicultural education and mental well-being. This variable is also referred to as WBS.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Reliability analysis**

The reliability analysis result is seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Cronbach Alpha for all variables*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.71	26

**Demographic analysis**

This study conducted a survey among international students in Kurdistan region universities. There were 120 participants in the study, consisting of 57 males and 63 females. The number of men who are fluent in the Kurdish language outweighs the number of women who are fluent in Kurdish, even though the number of female participants in the study outweighed the number of male participants.

**Descriptive statistics for scales of measurement**

The descriptive statistics for the two scales of measurement can be seen in table 2. According to the results, the mean score for the Multicultural stress scale is 3.65. This score falls between neutral and agree (Strongly Disagree = 1 Disagree = 2 Neutral = 3 Agree = 4 Strongly Agree = 5). However, rounding it up to the next decimal place would be 4, which represents agree. This means that the participants of the study were moderately stressed due to multicultural education. Hypothesis one stated that Multicultural education increases international students' stress. Hypothesis one is therefore accepted.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics for scales of measurement*

	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Multiculturalstress	120	3.65	.47	2.33	4.42
Mental Wellbeing	120	3.59	.63	1.93	4.86
Valid N (listwise)	120				
Missing N (listwise)	0				

Likewise, the mean of mental well-being fell between neutral and agree, and rounding up to, the next decimal point would

be 4, which is agreed. This proved that Kurdistan international students' mental well-being is moderately good.

**Correlation analysis results**

From the analysis as seen in Table 3, between mental well-being and multicultural stress, there is a weak negative correlation. The correlation coefficient between mental well-being and multicultural stress is -.268, significant at a .003 level ( $r = -.268, p < .003$ ).

**Table 3**

*Correlation analysis of mental well-being and multicultural stress*

		Multicultural stress	Mental Wellbeing
Multicultural stress	Pearson Correlation	1	
Mental wellbeing	Pearson Correlation	-.268	1

*Note: \*\*p < .003*

**Regression analysis results**

A linear regression analysis was carried out on the transformed variables. The results are displayed in Tables 4, 5, and 6.

**Table 4**

*Model Summary Mental wellbeing*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.268 <sup>a</sup>	.072	.064	.61190

a. Predictors: (Constant), MSS

**Table 5**

*ANOVA for mental wellbeing*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.430	1	3.430	9.159	.003
	Residual	44.182	118	.374	1	
	Total	47.612	119			

a. Dependent variable: WBS

b. Predictors: (Constant), MSS

**Table 6**

*Coefficients of mental wellbeing*

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficient	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant	4.907	.438	.00	11.195 < .001
Multicultural stress	-.361	.119	-.268	-3.026 .003

Dependent variable: WBS

From the ANOVA table, the model is statistically significant at a .003 level. The coefficient table shows that multicultural stress has a negative effect on mental well-being in Kurdistan International students. For every 1 unit of change in mental well-being, there is a -.361 decrease in multicultural stress. Multicultural stress, therefore, has a negative effect on mental well-being. With these results, the third hypothesis was accepted. All three hypotheses for this study were accepted.

### **Results on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) based on the university of Warwick method**

Using the method of measurement approved by Warwick medical school, each case or participant is scored based on their responses. Participants were scored between 14, which is the lowest score for the mental well-being scale, and 70, which is the highest score for this test. The highest score for this study was 68 and the lowest score was 27. The mean score for the participants in this study was 50.27 with a standard deviation of 8.86.

### **Discussion**

The research aimed to analyze the impact of multicultural education on the mental well-being of international students in Kurdistan region universities. This study is one of the few studies that has addressed multicultural education's impact on the mental well-being of international students studying in Kurdistan region universities. This study researched the stress of multicultural education on international students studying in Kurdistan universities. The study found that international students in Kurdistan universities are moderately stressed. Previous studies that considered different data sets and locations found that most international students are multiculturally stressed (Banks & Banks, 2019; Turner, 2021). The study found that international students studying in Kurdistan universities have a moderate level of mental well-being. The mean score for the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale for the participants in this study was 50.27. This score is similar to the scores of Gremigni & Bianco's (2012) study on an Italian study (49.3, with SD=6.98). The Warwick medical school set a score of 60 as the cut-off point for mental well-being (Warwick Medical School, n.d). Comparing these results with the findings of this study, the majority of the participants of this study do not meet the cut-off point for mental well-being.

The mental well-being of international students in Kurdistan region universities is not up to par with the standard of mental well-being required in individuals. This can be attributed to the effect of multicultural education. This finding is alarming and calls for the attention of the major stakeholders of education in Kurdistan region. This study provides some of the reasons that led to the participants not meeting the cut-off point for mental well-being. Further research may however be needed to establish other causes of poor mental well-being among international students in Kurdistan region universities.

From the analysis of this study's data, it was established that there is a weak correlation between multicultural stress and mental wellbeing. This means that the two concepts are slightly related. The regression analysis however showed that multicultural stress has an impact on the mental well-being of

international students in Kurdistan region universities. The third hypothesis for this study which purported that multicultural stress impacts the mental well-being among international students studying in Kurdistan universities was confirmed to be true. The findings of this study support the findings of Turner (2021), Jackson, Ray & Bybell (2019).

The multicultural distress scale applied in this study reflected racial questions that addressed how participants felt in different situations, where they sensed they were the minority. This included social, professional, and academic situations among others. The mean of the responses given under the multicultural distress scale proved that, most of the participants felt uncomfortable in locations, situations and circumstances, where they felt they were the minority. This in turn affected their mental well-being.

The mental health of students should be the core of every educational institution. This is because students' educational achievement and success can be impeded if they are stressed. From the literature and the empirical evidence of this research, it is evident that prolonged stress affects mental well-being (Banks & Banks, 2019; Can, Poyrazlı & Pillay, 2021; Turner, 2021; Charles, Karnaze & Leslie, 2022). It is therefore important that educators in Kurdistan universities acknowledge the stress factors of international students in Kurdistan universities. It is also important that the mental health of international students be considered. There should be policies and aid provided to international students, to help them overcome depression and other mental health-related issues.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study has set precedence, both in the selection of the sample (Kurdistan region international students) and in the combination of scales of measurement used in this study. The mental health of Kurdistan international university students has received little attention in the literature. This study, therefore, fills an important gap in the literature, which would encourage other researchers to consider similar research. The scale of measurements exhibited a good measure of reliability, as such, this study recommends that future researchers consider this scale of measurement when considering similar research.

The study achieved its aim and in the course of answering the research questions and confirming the hypothesis, information has been made available, not only to educators, but to government institutions, scholarship boards, and international student support organizations in Kurdistan region. Addressing the needs of the current students would help grow the number of international students in the future. This would in turn add extra credibility to education in Kurdistan region.

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