

23 correlation and hierarchical multiple regression were utilized to examine the association between
24 acculturation stressors and academic adjustment.

25 **Results**

26 The results from the Pearson correlation revealed the negative correlation of perceived
27 discrimination ($r = -.23, p < 0.01$), perceived hate/rejection ($r = -.18, p < 0.05$), perceived fear ($r =$
28 $-.24, p < 0.01$), and perceived cultural shock ($r = -.17, p < 0.05$) with academic adjustment.
29 Further, the hierarchical regression model revealed that marital status ($\beta = .223, p < .01$) had a
30 positive association with academic adjustment, whereas perceived fear ($\beta = -.206, p < .05$) had a
31 negative association with academic adjustment even after including students' background
32 characteristics and other acculturation stressors.

33 **Conclusion**

34 Addressing acculturation stressors among international students in higher education institutions
35 is essential to facilitate positive academic adjustment. Mainly, perceived fear has negatively
36 affected students' academic adjustment. Based on these findings, tailored programs must be
37 developed to curtail students' perceived fear in order to enhance their academic performance in
38 South Korean higher education institutions.

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40 **Key words:** Acculturation stressors, Academic adjustment, Higher education institutions, South
41 Korea, Nepalese students

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Introduction

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International students' social and ethnic identities, backgrounds, communication skills, and acculturation levels and the effects of these aspects on their academic performance and adjustment in host cultures have become an essential concern in higher education institutions worldwide [1]. Evidence from Western higher education institutions has suggested that international students experience a higher level of psychological, social, and academic distress [2-5]. Therefore, the extent to which acculturation stressors affect academic adjustment among international students in different cultural settings (i.e., non-Western contexts) requires similar scrutiny in order to better adapt the increasing number of international students to their host culture, such as the Republic of Korea (henceforth South Korea).

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Acculturation is a critical factor that affects immigrants' health status (including psychological, somatic, and social aspects) while they are in the process of adjusting to a dominant culture [6]. Furthermore, acculturation stressors cause a high level of distress for an individual in achieving desired outcomes in new cultural settings [6]. For international students from non-English-speaking countries with lower socioeconomic status, they have increased difficulty in academic adjustment due to language-related barriers, cultural differences, and economic hardships. These students experience a significant level of acculturation stress, suffer from poor physical and mental health, and encounter challenges in academic achievement [7-9]. For instance, in the United States of America, a growing number of studies demonstrated that ethnic minority students have a higher level of acculturation stress and difficulty in academic adjustment to mainstream US educational institutions. Evidence suggested that Latina/o and Native American students are disadvantaged groups with lower academic adjustment potential

67 due to their cultural heritage, speaking English in their native accent or dialects, and their sense
68 of exclusion from US educational institutions [10–13]. Similar findings in Australia and Europe
69 report that a substantial number of students expressed distress, felt unconnected, encountered
70 lower levels of social and academic integration, and experienced poor emotional wellbeing [4].

71 Several aspects have been revealed as risk factors for academic adjustment among
72 international students. Studies have found these risk factors to include cultural norms, language
73 barriers, perceived discrimination, financial problems, work restrictions, higher tuition fees,
74 accommodation, and transportation problems [5]. For example, Turkish Muslim students who
75 participated in the Erasmus student exchange to a European country had difficulty adjusting due
76 to fear of the unknown, loneliness, food shock, and being an object of suspicion [2]. These risk
77 factors, or stressors, further exacerbate international students' acculturation stress, impacting
78 their academic adjustment capability and performance in higher education institutions.

79 Abundant evidence from previous studies has shown that among immigrants, refugees,
80 and international students, there is an association of acculturation stressors with ill (mental)
81 health status, substance dependency, social maladaptation, and hindrances to achieving desired
82 preference in a host society[14]. For instance, a study conducted among Korean international
83 students living in the Pittsburgh area found that acculturation stressors were strongly correlated
84 to poor mental health status [15].

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86 **Context of South Korea**

87 With a population of around 51.63 million, South Korea historically emphasized
88 educational attainment for its citizens even in times of economic hardship. By the end of the
89 Korean War (1950–1953), the Korean Peninsula gradually overcame its absolute poverty and has

90 now transformed into a prosperous country. Today, South Korea is known as the “Asian Tiger,”
91 ranking third in Asia and 13th in the world economy. The socioeconomic transformation from
92 poverty-stricken society to prosperity is a result of Confucian values of diligence and importance
93 given to educational attainment and rapid expansion of higher education institutions [16].

94 Economic advancement in South Korea led to the internationalization of South Korean
95 higher education institutions, adding to Korean higher education's global competency.
96 Consequently, South Korea experienced a quantitative expansion of international students, as
97 there were 4,000 international students in 2004, which increased to 85,923 in 2011 [17]. As of
98 January 2020, a total of 118,342 international students were in South Korea, the majority of them
99 from Asia, including China (59,720), Vietnam (18,640), Mongolia (5,788), Nepal (1,964), and
100 Japan (1,919) – ranking Nepal as the fourth-largest contributor to the population of international
101 students in South Korea [18]. Moreover, the South Korean government has announced a plan to
102 increase the number of international students to 200,000 by 2023 with the goal of making South
103 Korea an educational hub in Asia.

104 Along with the increasing number of international students in South Korea and
105 positioning South Korea as an educational hub, the South Korean government attempted to
106 improve academic competencies via various policy innovations, including Brain Korea 21
107 Project, World Class University Project, Humanity Korea, Social Science Korea, University for
108 Creative Korea, Brain Korea 21, and BrainKorea21 Plus [19]. Additionally, the National
109 Research Foundation of Korea provides various research funds to assist university professors and
110 students (including international students) in enhancing their academic performance and
111 competency in South Korean higher education institutions. Specifically, South Korea attempts to

112 extend itself in knowledge economics by strengthening its academic competitiveness at different
113 levels (including at the university, faculty, and student level). To do so, the country invested
114 US\$73.3 billion for research and development to strengthen higher education institutions to a
115 “global standard” [20]. Along with all these efforts, how well international students are adjusted
116 in South Korean academic institutions is an essential concern for policymakers and educational
117 researchers.

118 Jon [21] recognized that with the increasing number of international students in South
119 Korea, international students’ academic adjustment is critical to ensuring that Korean students
120 may develop intercultural learning. However, international students’ academic adjustment issues
121 in South Korea have not been well documented. Specifically, most relevant studies were
122 conducted in the Korean language and emphasized Chinese students’ acculturation issues; of
123 these studies, results were mixed in terms of acculturation levels [22-24]. For example, Lee, Jon,
124 and Byun [24] mentioned that Chinese students in South Korea were less accepted, felt
125 discriminated against, and experienced negative stereotypes in comparison to students from
126 North America and Europe. In contrast, Jon, Lee, and Byun [23] revealed that Chinese students
127 think of South Korea as an attractive destination due to scholarship opportunities, geographical
128 proximity with China, employability after graduation, safety and security, and easier visa
129 accessibility than Japan and other Western countries. Consequently, Chinese students expressed
130 increased academic satisfaction in terms of academic resources, facilities, and quality of
131 instruction in South Korean higher education institutions. Similarly, Alemu and Cordier [25]
132 demonstrated that international students are generally satisfied in South Korean higher education
133 institutions.

155 self-administered questionnaire. Four cases were removed due to missing information.
156 Ultimately, a sample size of 132 was analyzed. In 2015, a total of 580 Nepalese students enrolled
157 in all South Korean universities [27]. Therefore, the study sample is acceptable for data analysis
158 with 7.36% margin of error at the 95% confidence interval.

159 **Ethics Statement**

160 Ethical consideration was concerned for the data collection process to maintain the
161 respondents' privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. For instance, in the cover letter
162 of the questionnaire, the researcher mentioned the following statement — "Your information will
163 remain confidential; please do not include your name. If you choose to participate, please answer
164 all questions as honestly as possible and return the completed questionnaire promptly.
165 Participation is strictly voluntary." The questionnaires were placed at a specific place to maintain
166 privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation and asked to return the questionnaires
167 voluntarily another day. Adhering to these ethical considerations, questionnaires were collected
168 on another day. The questionnaires were anonymized, and the data collection process was
169 completely voluntary.

170 **Instruments**

171 *Acculturative stressor.* The researcher used the Acculturative Stress Scale for
172 International Students (ASSIS), created by Sandhu and Asrabadi [28]. The ASSIS consists of 36
173 items in total, including perceived discrimination (13 items), homesickness (4 items), perceived
174 hate/rejection (5 items), fear (4 items) and stress due to cultural change (3 items), guilt (2 items),
175 and non-specific concerns (5 items). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to
176 5 (strongly agree), where a higher score represents a higher level of acculturative stress, was

177 incorporated. The reliability Cronbach's alpha for the 36-item scale was .92; the reliability
178 Cronbach's alpha for each stressor ranged from .70 to .92.

179 *Academic adjustment.* The researcher used Baker and Siryk's [29] scale to measure
180 academic adjustment with slight modifications. The researcher created Cluster 2 questions that
181 referred to students' motivation, while Cluster 3 referred to students' performance. Then, Cluster
182 2 and Cluster 3 were combined to measure students' academic adjustment. Cluster 2 had the
183 questions as: I am definite about reasons for being in Korea to study; I have well-defined
184 academic goals; I consider a college/university degree important; I enjoy academic work, my
185 interests are related to current research work; I doubt the value of college/university degree in
186 Korea. Cluster 3 included: I find academic work difficult; I do not function well during exams or
187 experiments; I am not satisfied with academic performance; I do not feel smart enough for
188 course/research work; I do not use study time efficiently; I do not enjoy writing papers for
189 courses/research; I have trouble concentrating when studying; I do not do well academically
190 considering the effort; I have trouble getting started on homework. The rating scale was Yes, No,
191 and Do Not Know. Positive attitudes on academic adjustment were coded as 1, and non-positive
192 attitudes towards their academic adjustment were coded as 0. The reliability Cronbach's alpha
193 for the academic adjustment scale was .75.

194 **Data Analysis**

195 First, descriptive statistics were performed. Then, Pearson correlation testing was
196 conducted to examine the associations between students' background characteristics, the five
197 dimensions of acculturative stress (e.g., discrimination, homesickness, hate/rejection, fear,

198 cultural shock, and guilt), and students' academic adjustment. Finally, hierarchical multiple
199 regression was conducted using SPSS.

200 **Results**

201 Table 1 presents the demographic information of Nepalese students' who were enrolled
202 in 36 Korean higher education institutions. Most students (78.8%) were male, whereas only
203 21.2 % of students were female. There was an almost equal proportion of married (48.5%) to
204 never married (51.5%) students. Approximately 53.8% of students did not feel comfortable using
205 the Korean language in everyday communication. Most of the students (72.7%) received a full
206 scholarship to pursue their higher education in South Korea.

207 **Table 1.** Demographic Information of the Sample (Sample = 132)

Variables	Number	%	Mean (SD)
Age			29.50 (3.59)
Male	104	78.8	
Female	28	21.2	
Marital Status			
Single	68	51.5	
Ever Married	64	48.5	
Korean Language			
Not comfortable	71	53.8	
Comfortable	61	46.2	
Scholarship Status			
Not full scholarship	36	27.3	

Full Scholarship 96 72.7

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209 Table 2 presents the correlation for background characteristics, acculturation stressors,
 210 and academic adjustment. As shown in Table 2, students' full scholarship ($r = -.18, p < 0.05$) was
 211 negatively correlated with the level of Korean language comfort level. Homesickness ($r = .17, p <$
 212 0.05) had negative correlation with Korean language comfort level. Homesickness ($r = .22, p <$
 213 0.01) and perceived discrimination had positive correlation. Similarly, perceived hate/rejection (r
 214 $= .75, p < 0.01$), fear ($r = .38, p < 0.01$), cultural shock ($r = .31, p < 0.01$), and guilt ($r = .20, p <$
 215 0.05) had positive correlation with perceived discrimination, respectively. Perceived
 216 hate/rejection ($r = .30, p < 0.01$), cultural shock ($r = .36, p < 0.01$, and guilt ($r = .37, p < 0.01$) had
 217 positive correlation with homesickness, respectively. Perceived fear, cultural shock, and guilt
 218 had positive correlation. Moreover, academic adjustment ($r = .19, p < 0.05$) had positive
 219 association with married students. However, academic adjustment ($r = -.23, p < 0.01$) had
 220 negative correlation with perceived discrimination ($r = -.23, p < 0.01$). Academic adjustment ($r =$
 221 $-.18, p < 0.05$) had negative correlation with perceived hate/rejection. Academic adjustment ($r =$
 222 $.24, p < 0.01$) had negative correlation with perceived fear. Similarly, academic adjustment ($r =$
 223 $.17, p < 0.05$) had negative correlation with cultural shock.

224 **Table 2.** *Correlation of Statistical Control, Independent, and Dependent Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Female	–										
2. Married	0.12	–									
3. Korean language	0.03	-0.04	–								

4. Full scholarship	-0.14	-0.08	-.18*	–							
5. Discrimination	-0.07	0.03	-0.13	0.05	–						
6. Homesickness	0.09	0.03	-.17*	0.07	.22**	–					
7. Hate/Rejection	-0.08	0.04	-0.12	0.07	.75**	.30**	–				
8. Fear	-0.09	0.06	-0.08	-0.01	.38**	0.14	.48**	–			
9. Culture shock	0.01	-0.06	-0.12	0.13	.31**	.36**	.26**	.20*	–		
10. Guilt	-0.15	0.05	-0.05	-0.05	.20*	.37**	.32**	.23**	.28**	–	
11. Academic Adjustment	-0.01	.19*	-0.02	-0.00	-.23**	-0.16	-.18*	-.24**	-.17*	-0.13	–

Note: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

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226 Table 3 presents the hierarchical linear regression model with students' background
 227 characteristics and acculturation stressors predicting academic adjustment. Model 1 ($R^2 = .041$)
 228 presents the effect of students' background characteristics (e.g., gender, marital status, Korean
 229 language use, and full scholarships) on academic adjustment. The results revealed that marital
 230 status ($\beta = .202, p < .05$) was positively associated with academic adjustment. However, other
 231 background characteristics (i.e., gender, Korean language use, and full scholarships) were not
 232 associated with academic adjustment. Model 2 included all background characteristics and
 233 academic stresses to examine their effects on academic adjustment. As such, Model 2 (R^2
 234 $= .157$) demonstrates that marital status ($\beta = .203, p < .01$) remained a positive association with
 235 academic adjustment. However, perceived fear ($\beta = -.206, p < .05$) was negatively associated
 236 with academic adjustment. Other acculturation stressors (i.e., discrimination, homesickness,
 237 hate/rejection, cultural shock) did not have a statistically significant effect on academic
 238 adjustment.

239 **Table 3.** Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Constant	9.438	.740		13.859	1.397	
Gender	-.267	.695	-.034	-.456	.694	-.058
Marital Status	1.298	.566	.202*	1.430	.549	.223**
Korean language	-.081	.571	-.013	-.456	.559	-.071
Full scholarship	.016	.646	.002	.014	.633	.002
Discrimination				-.058	.035	-.215
Homesickness				-.085	.083	-.101
Hate/Rejection				.073	.088	.115
Fear				-.178	.084	-.206*
Culture shock				-.042	.095	-.042
Guilt				-.076	.134	-.055
<i>R</i> ²		.041			.157	
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²		.010			.087	
<i>R</i> ² change		.041			.116	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²		1.343			2.774*	

240 *Note:* **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

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Discussion

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Understanding the factors that affect academic adjustment among international students is essential for enhancing academic competitiveness. In order to strengthen international students' academic adjustment capabilities and the academic competency of higher education institutions, policymakers and practitioners must be well-informed of these factors. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, studies on these factors as barriers toward academic adjustment have not yet been conducted in a South Korean context.

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Academic adjustment is crucial, as students with better academic adjustment capabilities possess a higher level of personal satisfaction and academic success, yielding better output in a competitive educational environment. In South Korea, universities are experiencing increasing numbers of international students, with most universities in South Korea gradually heading toward global competitiveness, thereby enhancing South Korea universities' global ranking. Moreover, at the macro level, internationalization of higher education in South Korea functions to strengthen "soft power," enriching Korean culture and the academic system globally. In such a context, it is essential to understand the extent to which acculturation stressors impede or facilitate academic adjustment among international students in the South Korean educational environment. Here, the key findings of the study have elucidated Nepalese international students' academic adjustment in South Korean higher education institutions

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First, the study revealed that marital status had a positive association for academic adjustment among Nepalese students in South Korean higher education institutions. The result is inconsistent with previous studies in the Asian context, which, in the case of Malaysian higher education institutions, found that international students' marital status did not influence

263 sociocultural adjustment [30]. Similar findings have revealed that international academics'
264 marital status did not influence sociocultural adjustment in Saudi Arabian higher education
265 institutions either [31]. Additionally, inconsistent with other studies' findings [13,32], married
266 Asian students have a lower academic adjustment level in the USA and German universities.
267 However, in the current study, both in bivariate and multivariate hierarchical regression analyses,
268 students' marital status remained a robust positive predictor for academic adjustment. This may
269 suggest that married Nepalese students in South Korea are more motivated and determined to
270 work toward academic achievement.

271 Second, in the bivariate level, the study revealed that perceived discrimination,
272 hate/rejection, fear, and cultural shock had negatively correlated with academic adjustment
273 among Nepalese students in South Korean higher education institutions. Specifically, perceived
274 discrimination ($r = -.23$) and fear ($r = -.24$) had strong negative correlation (** $p < 0.01$) with
275 academic adjustment. Even in the USA, international students experience various discrimination
276 levels based on the regions (or nations) they come to the USA [33]. The level of perceived
277 discrimination negatively impacted educational experience and actual academic performance
278 [34]. Likewise, Nepalese students may perceive themselves as being discriminated against in the
279 South Korean cultural context. Consequently, those who perceived themselves as being
280 discriminated against had their self-esteem negatively affected, thereby leading to decreased
281 competence for educational attainment, including academic adjustment. Indeed, perceived
282 discrimination leads to social and academic marginalization from the mainstream academic
283 culture, such as deterring student engagement from learning outcomes.

284 Third, perceived fear remained the strongest predictor that negatively affected Nepalese
285 international students' academic adjustment in South Korea in bivariate and hierarchical linear
286 regression analysis. Although a further qualitative study is required to determine the factors that
287 trigger "fear" among international students in South Korea, the study confirmed that perceived
288 fear ultimately negatively affected Nepalese students' academic adjustment. The findings may
289 imply several reasons for triggering this fear, such as the fear of uncertainty in new Korean
290 educational and sociocultural contexts, language changes and cultural differences hindering
291 effective communication, fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, fear of non-native accents, and
292 the fear for the unknown. Perhaps in academia, the hierarchical social structure makes it more
293 challenging to adjust, and that too may create "fear" for international students.

294 Fourth, the study revealed that perceived fear remained a strong predictor for academic
295 adjustment negatively in the hierarchical linear model. Similarly, perceived discrimination,
296 hate/rejection, fear, and cultural shock had negatively affected the academic adjustment at the
297 bivariate level. Higher education institutions have an awareness of students' perceived
298 difficulties, such that universities have initiated several programs to support students' mental
299 health issues. For example, currently, several universities have support centers for international
300 students' mental health through university-centered counseling programs concentrating on topics
301 related to depression, anxiety, emotional difficulties, academic stress, and personal and
302 relationship problems. The findings of the study further provide insight to counseling centers
303 that they must help international students in overcoming perceived fear. However, most
304 international students are unlikely to use university-centered counseling services due to language
305 and cultural barriers since most services are provided in the Korean language. There are some

306 testimonies of international students who expressed their difficulties effectively communicating
307 with counselors who deliver their services in the Korean language.

308 Fifth, the current study has some limitations. The study used cross-sectional data and
309 only employed Nepalese international students in the South Korean cultural context. Further
310 study is needed to explore adaptation strategies and difficulties in Korean academic culture [35].
311 An additional qualitative study needs to dig deeper into reasons for exploring academic
312 adjustment barriers among students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, as there are several
313 international students from various nations in any given university. Another limitation of the
314 study is that the study is limited to Nepalese international students' experiences. Despite this
315 constraint, the study's findings have merit as they identified acculturation stressors (i.e.,
316 perceived fear) as crucial barriers to academic adjustment. This result helps inform national
317 policies to better adapt international students to South Korean higher education with ease and
318 grace. Well-adapted students and students with fewer acculturation problems could contribute
319 more effective and successful results in a highly competitive educational environment.

320 In conclusion, addressing acculturation stressors among international students may yield
321 higher levels of personal satisfaction, enhance productive academic life, and increase
322 performance among international students living and studying in South Korea. Doing so
323 ultimately enables students to strengthen Korean higher education institutions' academic
324 competitiveness in the long run.

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