

Challenges University Students Face while Studying away from Hometown: A Cross-Sectional Study

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INTRODUCTION

Having a college or university degree has become a requirement in today's society due to its potential to increase job prospects and financial stability. It is observed as a significant stage of development that signifies the expected transition into adulthood.^[1] Furthermore, pursuing higher education also offers students the opportunity to secure a better and brighter future, leading many to seek educational opportunities outside their hometowns.^[2,3] In Saudi Arabia, there has been a significant increase in university education since 2005, with the establishment of 34 public and private universities, resulting in an expansion of educational opportunities.^[4,5] Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 emphasizes the importance of education, leading to a surge in the number of college students, reaching 1,090,407 in total, and consequently

ABSTRACT This study aims to highlight the challenges that undergraduates face when traveling a significant distance from home to study. These challenges are psychological, financial, and nutritional. The study was descriptive and based on a survey conducted to investigate the challenges faced by university students while studying away from their hometown. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 214 undergraduates between February and April 2021. The collected data were analyzed using the computer program SPSS version 24. Pearson's Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were applied to observe associations between qualitative variables. A total of 214 undergraduates participated in the study, with a median age of 22 years. The study found significant relationships between weight change and housing ($P < 0.001$), weight change and distance ($P < 0.001$), level of homesickness and housing ($P < 0.001$), level of homesickness and college distance ($P < 0.001$), and financial status with housing ($P = 0.025$). The study revealed that a significant number of undergraduate participants face psychological, financial, and nutritional challenges. These challenges include psychosocial issues, such as homesickness financial difficulties, such as money issues, and nutritional concerns, such as weight changes.

KEYWORDS: *Students' challenges when studying away from home, studying abroad impacts, undergraduates studying abroad*

an increase in students opting to study away from their hometowns.^[6,7] It is important to investigate challenges as university students commonly encounter difficulties when adjusting to their academic environment, and these challenges can often manifest as mental health issues with varying degrees of impact.^[8-11] Despite the lack of previous studies on this particular topic in our region and globally, we are motivated and interested in exploring the challenges and obstacles faced by undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia who are studying away from home. In this study, we categorize these challenges into

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three main areas: psychological, financial, and nutritional challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The study was descriptive and based on a survey conducted between February and April 2021 to investigate the challenges faced by university students studying away from their hometowns in Saudi Arabia. Ethical approval was obtained from the Majmaah University’s ethics committee. The study population comprised male and female university students in the central and western regions who were studying outside their hometowns, excluding those who resided in their hometowns. The sampling technique employed was probability sampling using a multistage clustering approach. The central and western regions were initially clustered, followed by clustering of the higher education institutes within those regions. Participants were selected randomly from the central regions of Riyadh and Qassim, as well as from the western region, specifically Jeddah city. A Google Form questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, based on a review of the relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of six sections: 1) consent and acceptance for participation, 2) personal questions, 3) demographic data, 4) questions about financial difficulties, 5) psychosocial status questions, and 6) nutritional status questions. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaire did not include any personal identifiers such as names, phone numbers, emails, or any other identifiable information. The questionnaire went through three evaluations and was then translated into Arabic before being distributed to the students. Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS version 24 computer program. Pearson’s Chi-square and Fisher’s exact tests were utilized to examine associations between qualitative variables. A *P* value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. Among 214 participants, 144 (67.3%) were males, whereas 70 (32.7%) were females. The overall median age was 22 years (minimum 18, maximum 37). Most participants scored a GPA of 3–3.9, 77 (36%) followed by those who scored 4–4.4 67 (31.3%) and followed by those who scored more than 4.5 50 (23.4%) followed by those who scored less than 3 20 (9.3%).

Table 1 shows the different aspects that can affect those who are living outside their hometowns, especially financial, nutritional, social, and psychological. Financially, it showed that 124 (57.9%) of participants

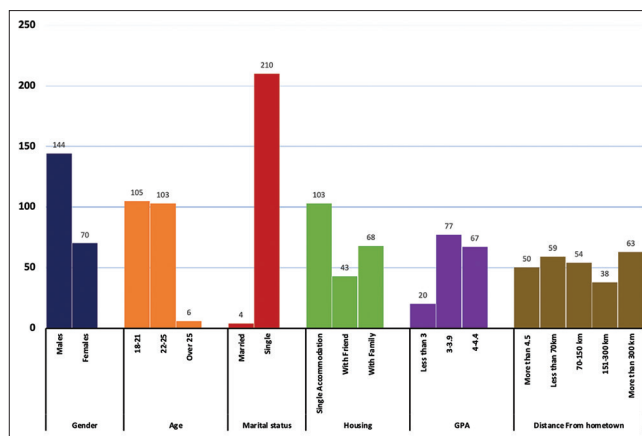


Figure 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 214)

Table 1: Participant’s responses toward specific challenges

Challenge	Response	Count	Percentage
Financial status is a concern to studying abroad	Yes	124	57.9%
	No	90	42.1%
	Total	214	100%
My weight has changed while studying abroad	Increased weight	85	39.7%
	Decreased weight	70	32.7%
	No change	59	27.6%
	Total	214	100%
I feel socially stable since I moved out	Yes	39	18.2%
	No	65	30.4%
	Neutral	110	51.4%
	Total	214	100%
I feel homesick	Yes	126	58.9%
	No	54	25.2%
	Neutral	34	15.9%
	Total	214	100%

were negatively affected. About the nutritional effect, we found that 85 (39.7%) increased in weight and 70 (32.7%) decreased, whereas 59 (27.6%) did not notice any change.

Table 2 shows that there was a significant relationship between weight change and housing as well as distance (*P* < 0.001), with those living alone or further away experiencing more weight changes. However, there was no significant difference between weight and academic performance. The majority of those who lived alone or with friends noticed a decrease in weight. (42.7% and 48.8%, respectively). Those who lived further away from college significantly experienced a decrease in weight compared to those who lived closer.

Table 2: Relationship between weight change and housing, distance, academic performance

	Weight change			Total	P
	Decreased weight	Increased weight	No change		
Housing					
Single accommodation	44	44	15	103	<0.001
	42.7%	42.7%	14.6%	100.0%	
With family	20	15	33	68	
	29.4%	22.1%	48.5%	100.0%	
With friends	21	11	11	43	
	48.8%	25.6%	25.6%	100.0%	
	85	70	59	214	
Total	39.7%	32.7%	27.6%	100.0%	

Most of them, 58.7% of those living more than 300 km experienced a decrease in weight.

The study found that there was a significant relationship between the level of homesickness and housing as well as college distance ($P < 0.001$) with those living alone or further away experiencing higher levels of homesickness. However, there was no significant relationship between homesickness and academic performance. Those who lived in single accommodation experienced higher levels of homesickness, with 51.5% agreeing, compared to those who lived with family (29.4%) or with friends (44.2%). Those who lived further away from college experienced higher levels of homesickness, with 57.1% of those living more than 300 km away agreeing that they felt homesick. There was no significant relationship found between homesickness and GPA, with similar percentages of agreement across all GPA ranges (ranging from 40.0% to 60.0%) [Table 3].

The results in Table 4 indicate that financial status had a significant relationship with housing ($P = 0.025$), but not with academic performance. The majority of those who lived in a single accommodation, with family, or with friends reported to have financial concerns (70.9%, 51.5%, and 69.8%, respectively). The majority of students in all GPA ranges reported good financial status. Specifically, the majority of those with a GPA of 4.5 or more (70.0%), 3 to 3.9 (67.5%), and less than 3 (75.0%) reported to have financial concerns.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that out of the total sample size of 214 students (100%), 124 students (57.9%) reported facing financial concerns. The impact of financial concerns was found to be significant among students living in single apartments alone (73, 70.9%) and those living with friends (30, 69.8%), but not as much among those living with their

Table 3: Relationship between homesickness with housing, distance, and academic performance

Distance from home to college					P
	Decreased weight	Increased weight	No change	Total	
>300 km	37	20	6	63	<0.001
	58.7%	31.7%	9.5%	100.0%	
151–300 km	19	24	16	59	
	32.2%	40.7%	27.1%	100.0%	
70–150 km	21	19	14	54	
	38.9%	35.2%	25.9%	100.0%	
<70 km	8	7	23	38	
	21.1%	18.4%	60.5%	100.0%	
Total	85	70	59	214	
	39.7%	32.7%	27.6%	100.0%	
GPA					
4.5 or more	19	11	20	50	0.079
	38.0%	22.0%	40.0%	100.0%	
4–4.5	28	19	20	67	
	41.8%	28.4%	29.9%	100.0%	
3–3.9	28	34	15	77	
	36.4%	44.2%	19.5%	100.0%	
<3	10	6	4	20	
	50.0%	30.0%	20.0%	100.0%	
Total	85	70	59	214	
	39.7%	32.7%	27.6%	100.0%	

family. Duong conducted a similar descriptive study on Vietnamese students that showed students who studied abroad were 90% concerned about finances.^[10] These findings aligns with the research conducted by Khawaja and Dempsey.^[12]

Regarding the dietary effect, specifically weight changes, 85 students (39.7%) noticed an increase in their weight, whereas 70 students (32.7%) experienced a decrease. The rest of the participants reported no significant change in their weight. A study conducted by Beasley on the effect of leaving home on diet showed that students gained weight during their first semester, an average of 3.2–2.0 kg.^[9]

It is worth noting that among students with lower scores (3 out of 5 or less), 50% of them experienced weight loss. This finding correlates with the psychosocial aspect, as 60% of those students reported feeling homesick. The psychosocial impact may affect both academic performance and weight status, as students may be emotionally overwhelmed and distracted from their studies due to homesickness.

Regarding the psychosocial effect, almost half of the students reported facing a high level of stress, and more than half experienced homesickness. These results are concerning as previous research consistently indicated that homesick students tended to experience

Table 4: Relationship between financial status and housing, and the relationship between financial status and academic performance

	Financial status is a concern			P
	No	Yes	Total	
Housing				
Single accommodation	30 29.1%	73 70.9%	103 100.0%	0.025
With family	33 48.5%	35 51.5%	68 100.0%	
With friends	13 30.2%	30 69.8%	43 100.0%	
Total	76 35.5%	138 64.5%	214 100.0%	
GPA				
4.5 or more	15 30.0%	35 70.0%	50 100.0%	0.149
4-4.5	31 46.3%	36 53.7%	67 100.0%	
3-3.9	25 32.5%	52 67.5%	77 100.0%	
<3	5 25.0%	15 75.0%	20 100.0%	
Total	76 35.5%	138 64.5%	214 100.0%	

a higher prevalence of health problems, psychological symptoms, and cognitive difficulties compared to their non-homesick counterparts. This finding is supported by Ryan *et al.*, which further strengthens the evidence for these associations.^[13] Surprisingly, no relationship was found between age and the level of homesickness, which contradicts the findings of Nghiem's study, where a significant difference was observed between younger and older first-year college students, with younger students experiencing more homesickness.^[14] However, these findings contradict previous studies, which indicated that stress levels were low among international students.^[15,16]

Overall, these findings shed light on the various effects of living outside one's hometown, including financial concerns, weight changes, and psychosocial factors. The links between these factors and academic performance are complex, suggesting that students may employ coping strategies and adapt to their new environments in different ways.

CONCLUSION

The study findings highlighted additional challenges faced by students studying away from home, beyond the fundamental issues such as finding housing and adapting to new cultures. These included psychosocial challenges such as homesickness, financial concerns, and nutritional changes leading to weight fluctuations. The results have the potential to guide future research

and improve support systems for undergraduates facing these challenges.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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