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“We Begin 300 Meters Behind the Starting Line”: Adaptation of Iranian Students in Hungary in the Post-Sanctions Era

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal qualitative research investigated the psychosocial adaptation trajectory of Iranian international students in Hungary and the challenges they encountered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 7-month to 1-year intervals with 20 Iranian students. Inductive content analysis was utilized to analyze the interview transcripts. Three themes identified were visa and banking challenges, the impact of the currency crisis in Iran on mental health, and positive and negative changes in psychological well-being. The results revealed that almost all students' well-being improved over time, despite facing challenges related to visas, banking, and Iran's recent economic crisis.

Keywords: banking challenges, economic crisis, international student, Iran, mental health

The number of international students enrolled at Hungarian universities in the academic year of 2017–2018 was 32,309, out of which 1,878 were Iranians (Oktatási Hivatal, 2018). This study explores the trajectory of the psychosocial adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary and the challenges they faced regarding

visas, banking, and the currency crisis. The currency crisis refers to the rapid depreciation of the Iranian currency (the rial) to a historic low point against the U.S. dollar in 2018, after the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, and imposed sanctions against Iran in 2018.

By looking at the lists of restricted and sanctioned countries (EU Sanctions Map, 2020; Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2019), Iran, compared with the other top 10 countries with the highest number of international students in Hungary,¹ is the only one that is restricted and sanctioned by three regions/organizations namely, the United States, European Union (EU), and United Nations. A majority of the students in Hungary are from countries that either have no sanction imposed on them, or their sanctions are less restrictive compared with Iran.

This study aims to create new knowledge by focusing on students from one of the Middle Eastern countries with the highest number of students in Hungary and one that is under more restrictive regulations and sanctions. To date, no studies have longitudinally investigated the psychosocial adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary regarding the effects of sanctions against Iran on Iranian students' mental health.

Generally, research on the adaptation of international students is primarily based on a cross-sectional design, and there is a paucity of longitudinal studies (Hirai et al., 2015). Consequently, as suggested by Ward and Geeraert (2016), it is time to move beyond cross-sectional studies and focus on longitudinal studies to advance acculturation theory and research. Ward and Geeraert (2016) called attention to the importance of including the broader ecological context in the home and host cultures. Policies such as visa and banking restrictions as well as sanctions could be understood as consequential changes in the ecological context that impact international students' adaptation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is considerable research on international students that has mainly focused on psychological and social aspects of their experiences. However, comparatively few studies have investigated international students' experiences from political viewpoints (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). International students share common experiences, but there are specific experiences that are comparatively more challenging for Iranian students than for those from other countries, especially nations with fewer or no restrictions or sanctions imposed on them.

¹ The 10 countries with the highest number of international students in Hungary were (in descending order): Germany, Romania, China, Serbia, Iran, Slovakia, Ukraine, Turkey, Norway, and Nigeria (Oktatási Hivatal, 2018).

Previous research reported a range of challenges that Iranian international students encounter, such as finding jobs, language problems, culture shock, cultural distance (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005), obtaining a visa, immigration processes, and financial problems due to an unsteady economy and sanctions on Iran (Khodabandelou et al., 2015). In this study, we focused exclusively on visas, banking, and currency crisis challenges facing Iranian students in Hungary. Below we present examples of these obstacles found in the literature.

Visa and Immigration Challenges

Before the Iranian revolution in 1979, many Iranian students went abroad unhindered to continue their studies; however, during that time, Iranians could travel without a visa to many places, and the Iranian rial was strong (Ehteshami, 2017). Following the revolution, sanctions were imposed against Iran, resulting in weak diplomatic ties with the West, and restricted freedom of movement for Iranians traveling abroad (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014).

The sanctions influenced many things, such as visa processing, which was considerably slowed down or halted altogether. Currently, the Iranian passport is globally ranked 101st (Henley & Partners, 2019), making it one of the world's weakest passports. Based on the Henley and Partners (2019) Passport Index, holders of the Iranian passport require a visa for 187 countries and can travel visa-free to 39.

Generally, international students have been found to face adaptation difficulties related to visas and immigration (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). These include strict visa policies ranging from difficulties getting an entrance visa and extending a visa, to preparing documents. One study reported that the main issues that the Iranian students faced in the Netherlands were related to getting a visa, gathering documents, such as the proof of financial support for living and studying permit, providing an income certificate and passport for accommodation, and obtaining work permits (Astinova, 2011).

Iranian students in the United States have also experienced challenges such as difficulties obtaining visas before and after entering the United States (Ditto, 2014). In Ditto's (2014) study, the process of getting a visa frustrated Iranian students the most. Similarly, in another study, Iranian students in the United States reported that the limitations imposed on the validity and length of their student visas impacted their life to the point that they could not return to Iran to visit their family for an extended time out of the fear of losing their visa (Karimzad, 2016).

Banking Challenges

Following the sanctions, many banks discriminated against their Iranian customers by either making it difficult for them to open a bank account (Eurofast Global Ltd, 2017) or abruptly freezing or closing their bank accounts in compliance with economic sanctions against Iran (Mobasher, 2018). As a result of bank closures, Iranian students abroad faced challenges regarding transferring funds from Iran (Astinova, 2011), making it difficult for many families to transfer

money to their children (Hafezi, 2016). Iranian students in European countries, such as Spain, Germany, Italy, and France, reported that the banks either refused to open bank accounts for them or froze their bank accounts (Jafari, 2019). Iranian students in Scandinavia (Johansson, 2013) and Canada (Eybagi, 2013) faced similar banking challenges.

Currency (Economic) Crisis Challenges

Shortly after the revolution, during the 1979–1981 hostage crisis, the United States imposed its first sanctions against Iran (Laub, 2015). In May 2018, the United States exited the Iran nuclear deal and reinstated economic sanctions against Iran (Gearan & DeYoung, 2018). Since 2018, Iran's economic situation has been sinking into a deep recession, and the Iranian currency is on the brink of collapse (Hosseini-Zadeh, 2018). As of July 2020, the rial is considered the least valued currency in the world (Internet Forex Resource, 2020).

The sanctions affected ordinary people, including Iranian students abroad (Mehrabi, 2014). Students who were financially dependent on their families had to return home because their families could not afford to pay their tuition fees (Mehrabi, 2014). The situation has become even more difficult for students since there are reports that the Iranian government has prevented students from buying dollars at a subsidized government rate ("No more cheap currency," 2018; Torbati, 2012), which is lower than the free market rate.

Iranian students in Malaysia reported being affected by the collapse of the rial, which has led to many students withdrawing from their studies and dropping out (Bani Kamal & Hossain, 2017). The decline of the Iranian currency has also impacted Iranian students in the United States. The currency crisis has made financial transactions difficult for students and for parents to transfer their children's tuition fees (Ditto, 2014). Iranian students in Scandinavia were also negatively affected by economic sanctions on Iran (Johansson, 2013). A majority of students were financially dependent on their parents, and as a result of the currency crisis, they either had less money to support themselves or had to ask their parents to send more money to pay for their expenses (Johansson, 2013). Similar currency crisis obstacles were experienced by Iranian students in Canada (Eybagi, 2013).

Aim of the Study

The current study explored the trajectory of psychosocial adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary and the challenges they faced. This study was conducted over a 7–12-month period to ensure there was at least a 6-month gap between the first and the second interviews (i.e., at least one full semester). The second interviews were conducted in the new academic year (2018–2019) as students' psychological adaptations in the host country tend to fluctuate with the new academic year (Golden, 1973; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). We attempted to make sure that enough time passed between the two interviews to enable us to follow up on changes over at least one full semester.

We focused specifically on visas, banking, and currency crisis challenges. In April 2018, the Iranian currency fell to its lowest rate in 35 years against the U.S. dollar, which occurred in between the two interviews. Initially, we did not predict specific challenges; however, after reading the interviews, the main sociopolitical and economic challenges that adversely impacted students' mental health were reported to be the currency crisis, visas, and bank-related issues. Hence, the main research questions guiding this study are as follows:

Q1: What are the main challenges that Iranian students face in Hungary that negatively impact their mental health?

Q2: How do Iranian students' mental health and adaptations change over time?

METHOD

This study adopted a longitudinal design using an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). We conducted semi-structured interviews with Iranian undergraduate and graduate students in Budapest, Hungary, between October 2017 and October 2018. This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at a Hungarian university in Budapest.

Participants

Twenty Iranian international students (13 males and seven females) participated in the first interview, of which 25% were graduates and 75% undergraduates. Their ages ranged from 18 to 36 ($M = 25.8$, $SD = 5.59$), and they were studying in English. Students' fields of study included medicine, psychology, dentistry, pharmacy, fine arts, business administration and management, international relations, and architecture.

Students were mostly recruited online from different university-exclusive community groups in Hungary and a few via snowball sampling. The benefit of the snowball sampling technique is that it "often shorten[s] the time and diminish[es] the cost required to assemble a participant group of sufficient size and diversity" (Sadler et al., 2010, p. 370). Out of the 20 Iranian students, 12 (five females and seven males) agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews. The rest did not respond or had left Hungary due to the currency crisis.

Procedures

The first interviews were carried out face to face by the first author between October 2017 and February 2018. The follow-up interviews were also conducted by the first author between September 2018 and October 2018 via an audio call. The main reason why we chose to do the face-to-face interviews for the first round was to establish rapport with the participants. The second interviews were conducted via audio call since the interviews were anticipated to take less time.

Also, rapport had already been established in the first interviews. All first-round interviews were conducted in Persian, except for three interviews conducted in English. All the follow-up interviews were conducted in Persian.

In total, we had 32 interviews: 20 for the first round and 12 for the second round. The first interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min, and the follow-up interviews were between 30 and 60 min in duration. The first author, fluent in both Persian and English, concurrently translated the Persian interviews to English and transcribed them on oTranscribe software. The three English interviews were also transcribed directly on oTranscribe. The audio-recorded interviews were all transcribed verbatim. All the interviews were transferred from oTranscribe to Microsoft Word. The longest interview transcription in the first round was 29 pages; the shortest was 16 pages. For the follow-up interviews, length ranged from six to eight pages.

Materials

Semi-structured Interview Questions

In the first interviews, we asked questions regarding participants' demographic data (e.g., age, gender, the field of study, financial status, etc.). Semi-structured interview questions addressed topics including psychological and sociocultural adaptation, academic and life hassles, changes in psychosocial adaptation, and the effect of the currency crisis in Iran on students' mental health. Some of the questions asked in the interviews included: "What are the daily hassles you have to deal with?," "How has your mental health changed since the first interview?," and "Would you have better psychological health living in Hungary or Iran?"

Data Analysis

We employed an inductive approach to content analysis to analyze the interview transcripts (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). An inductive approach is one of the most common methods of analyzing data utilized in qualitative research, in which the authors do not have any preconceived theories or categories for data analysis (Burnard et al., 2008). During the first stage, the lead author listened to the tape, translated and transcribed the data on oTranscribe, and read over the transcripts to familiarize herself with the data while looking for recurring patterns and themes.

The interviews were considered as units of analysis, as "the most suitable unit of analysis is whole interviews" (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 106). After, we divided each interview text into meaning units. We considered our meaning units as the paragraphs or sentences from the interview transcripts that were similar with regards to the content.

We then constructed codes from these meaning units. In order to formulate codes, the first and third authors performed open coding on Atlas.ti, line by line. All the authors reviewed the initial codes for similarity in content, and we then

combined them into code groups on Atlas.ti. In the Code Manager, we classified 59 distinct code groups for the first interviews and 27 code groups for the follow-up interviews. We present examples of meaning units and codes in Table 1.

Table 1: Meaning Unit to Code from Interview Transcripts

Meaning unit	Code
“The visa that immigration gives is miserably hard to get. The visa expires very soon.”	Immigration visa validity and obtaining a visa challenge
“One day, you wake up, and you realize that the currency’s value has decreased by half.”	A substantial decrease in the value of the rial

Table 2: Themes Emerging from Interview Transcripts

Topic	Higher order category	Code group
Visa and banking challenges	Obtaining and expiry of a visa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems with obtaining a visa • Frustration with visa expiration
	Bank account opening and closure issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems with opening a bank account • Bank account closure
Impact of the currency crisis in Iran on mental health	Currency crisis issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A decrease in the value of the rial • Financial pressure due to the currency crisis
	Currency crisis and mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currency crisis causing depression or anxiety • Currency crisis causing uncertainty
Positive and negative changes in psychological well-being	Positive mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health improved in Hungary • Optimism about future
	Negative mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health got worse in Hungary

We then combined similar or overlapping code groups into higher order categories on Atlas.ti. We further clustered similar higher order categories into potential topics. As in content analysis, we did not stop at categories but created

comprehensive topics in terms of the research question by merging similar higher order categories (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Examples of code groups, higher order categories, and topics are presented in Table 2. Finally, we summarized and analyzed the emerged topics and findings using the relevant literature.

RESULTS

Three major interconnected themes emerged from the data. They were visa and banking challenges, impact of the currency crisis in Iran on mental health, and positive and negative changes in psychological well-being. All topics that emerged from the data analysis are presented separately below.

Visa and Banking Challenges

Challenges in obtaining and extending visas and the underlying reasons made students anxious. According to many participants, one of the reasons they faced visa challenges was their nationality, which was perceived to be discriminatory. One participant who encountered many problems applying for a visa to spend one semester studying in another country stated, “My worst experience was anxiety regarding visas ... I think because I am Iranian, things will continue like this.”

The anxiety caused by applying for a visa as an Iranian person seemed to persist over time. Some participants also expressed worries about extending their visas after graduation. However, participants were aware that being an Iranian was an obstacle, which created uncertainty. One participant elaborated, “A big question mark appears after graduation, about what we should do ... For us, Iranians, things are much harder because we are not EU citizens.”

This new graduate student seemed ready to start doing her residency in a field of study that she liked; however, she felt discriminated against because she was aware that her EU peers could easily work after graduation, without visa complications. She noted, “We are placed in the second level. First, they give jobs to EU citizens ... to us much later. Hassles about visas are in the first place.”

Iranian students have to leave Hungary after graduation since they cannot easily extend their visas unless they plan to work or continue with their studies. Most international students, especially students from the EU, will return to their home country to start working after graduation since their degree is recognized in their country. However, they also have the opportunity to stay in Hungary for work or to move to other EU countries where they could find jobs. Since this opportunity is not available to Iranian students, it created a sense of inferiority among many students related to their peers from the EU.

A participant used the analogy of a “marathon” to show the hardships Iranian students go through due to economic, political, and visa problems. He commented, “Consider a marathon that everyone wants to compete. If some start from 100 meters and others start from zero, we [Iranian students] begin 300 meters behind the starting line.”

The visa obstacles created anxieties and uncertainties among Iranians because they were unsure whether they would be able to extend their visas. This created even more anxiety because if they were not able to get a visa, they had to leave Hungary.

A majority of the participants did not intend to go back to Iran after graduation, because if they left the country, there would be no guarantee that they would be able to obtain a visa again; that is, there would be no way for them to return.

Considering that obtaining a visa is not guaranteed, and the visa application takes time, students were motivated to find jobs before their student visa expired so they could apply for a working visa, which is valid for a longer time than a student visa. Obtaining a working visa allows students to stay in Hungary longer and offers them enough time to apply for a visa to another country. One participant said, "If I could find a job, I would be able to solve my visa problems because I would like to stay here."

Iranian students put their best efforts into finding jobs so they would be able to extend their visas to stay abroad longer and avoid getting deported. Their adaptation would have been improved if Hungary would "give [students] visas, treat them better, and let them study, stay and work," as one student acknowledged.

Another problem that Iranian students faced was banking restrictions. Due to regulations associated with the sanctions, Iranians could not hold a bank account in almost any bank in Hungary. The discriminatory actions of many banks against Iranians (including terminating their bank account abruptly or not opening an account for them, allegedly because of their nationality) were unreasonable for students. One participant reflected, "I went to open an account, and they asked for my passport ... they said, you can't open an account because you are Iranian."

Even the banks that allowed Iranians to open a bank account required more strict paperwork for countries under sanctions. The fact that the banking processes took longer only because of their nationality disappointed many students. One female participant noted,

When I went to open a bank account, they told me to go home and get my passport. Although it only took my friend ten minutes to get her bank card ... They said, "You should get permission because you're Iranian."

Besides the problem of opening a bank account, students reported problems with bank account closures. Because the banks had to comply with regulations, providing financial services to Iranians was halted. Many banks started to close the bank accounts of Iranians abroad. One participant expressed his anxiety regarding closures of bank accounts: "Anxieties exist for Iranians abroad ... I received a letter from a bank ... They are planning to close all Iranians' accounts." This participant spoke about the anxieties that Iranians have to go through because if their bank accounts get closed, they have no idea where to keep their money.

Banking obstacles are not common challenges among international students; they seem isolated to students whose countries are under sanction. One participant

perceived that banking obstacles were “specific to Iranians ... that Iranians are struggling with.”

Impact of Currency Crisis in Iran on Mental Health

During the second round of interviews, students reported that the sudden and steep decline in the value of the Iranian currency adversely influenced their mental health. One participant stated, “One day, you wake up, and you realize that the currency’s value has decreased by half ... This makes people depressed ... These things make me sad.”

The devaluation of the currency affected her so much that she preferred “not to check the news” and “the price of Euro.” She was glad that she did not have to live in Iran to directly witness the crisis: “If I were in Iran, my depression would have been worse.”

A majority of the participants were from the upper-middle class, and during the first interview, they did not report financial hassles. However, in the second interview, almost all of them reported financial difficulties. Many participants’ families had to sell their belongings or find a second job, and could not afford to pay for their children’s tuition fees. One participant claimed, “When I buy something, the price is three times higher. I had two cars: one of them is gone ... I am not mentally healthy because the value of the euro keeps going up [relative to the rial].”

This high-upper class participant was also affected by the currency crisis, as she had to sell one of her cars when planned to open a business, and she was asked by her father to go back to Iran.

A majority of the participants were financially dependent on their parents, and after the economic crisis, they were motivated to find jobs and to work harder to earn more money to compensate for their monetary losses. The currency crisis made them anxious about their future. One participant noted, “I get stressed that in addition to my studies ... I have to start working.”

The preceding demonstrates that the currency crisis prevented this student from focusing on both the academic and career aspects of her life. She acknowledged that if she had a job, she could “at least pay for [her] weekly expenses.”

Additionally, participants’ families were unable to transfer money to their children, because the money exchange services stopped transfers until the currency rate stabilized. This issue led to some participants looking for jobs as it was not possible to transfer money from Iran. The currency crisis seemed to be one of the main reasons for students’ psychological problems, as it directly affected other issues, such as financial security, the need for employment, and obtaining a visa.

Positive and Negative Changes in Psychological Well-Being

During the second round of interviews, most participants reported that they felt better than they had at the time of the first interview. However, a few reported being more anxious and depressed. A number of participants stated that they were satisfied to be in Hungary and that their anxiety had decreased. One female participant reported, “My mental well-being has changed because I have never lived independently ... This independence has made me grow ... I am still happy [to be in Hungary].”

Independent living was a challenge for many participants at the beginning. However, it became a great asset for them after living in Hungary as they believed they learned to complete life chores independently, such as cooking, cleaning, managing life expenses, and so on. Participants seemed to be happy to live their own way as one student acknowledged that “independence will never develop when the family is present.”

Other factors associated with better mental health among participants were economic opportunities and educational attainments in Hungary. Many participants believed that because the economic situation was unstable in Iran, and their future was unknown. One participant remarked, “I feel better in Hungary ... In Iran, your future is unknown, and an unknown future gives you a bad feeling.”

Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of the social and political freedom that they experienced in Hungary, which improved their mental health. One participant, when asked whether he felt mentally better in Hungary or in Iran, replied, “Definitely here [in Hungary] ... There are some low-level freedoms that you have here, but you don’t in Iran ... I don’t want to live in Iran now with the current situation.” Similar to most participants, he also desired higher order freedoms such as freedom of speech and gender equality that existed to a greater extent in Hungary than in Iran. However, even simple freedoms in clothing were perceived as essential and helped him “compensate for [his] bad days.”

Overall, a majority of participants felt more content over time. They valued more independence along with better sociopolitical and economic opportunities abroad than they would have had living in Iran. Previous research (Hosseini-Nezhad et al., 2019) also found that Iranian students in Hungary embraced the independence and freedom they had in Hungary.

A few participants in the second interview reported that their mental health had declined over time, mainly due to the economic crisis. One female participant said she was depressed, and that her mental health got worse as “the Euro is getting expensive.”

Despite various challenges, participants stayed hopeful. Their positive attitude as a way of coping with their challenges was evident in their statements that they were “optimistic about future,” they tried “not to think about the economic crisis,” and felt that “future will change.” Participants were aware that they had no choice but to stay positive, as they would not be able to stay focused on their goals otherwise.

It is expected that students' anxieties will persist as the Iranian currency's value continues to tumble, given that the United States imposed strong sanctions on Iran and that the Iranian government cut subsidies and increased the prices of goods. This is evident from one student's remark: "The subsidies cut down ... every day the price of meat, cheese, and milk is increasing."

DISCUSSION

This study explored the adaptation trajectory as well as the challenges of Iranian students in Hungary. Each of the themes that emerged will be investigated by referring to relevant literature.

Visa and Banking Challenges

Iranian students in Hungary experienced issues with visas and with opening and closing bank accounts due to sanctions. The visa challenges faced by Iranian students in Hungary were not without precedent; several studies have reported visa and immigration challenges among Iranian (Hefner-Babb & Khoshlessan, 2018) and Chinese (Yan, 2017) international students in the United States, and other international students in South Africa (Lee et al., 2017). Considering that most international students in Hungary are from countries with no or less restrictive sanctions compared with Iran and that the Iranian passport is one of the weakest globally, Iranians probably struggle with visa and immigration processes more than most international students.

Another challenge some Iranian students experienced in Hungary due to sanctions was discriminatory banking restrictions and policies. Iranians reported problems opening a bank account, and some existing bank accounts were closed abruptly. As a result, they had to withdraw their cash from the bank and either keep it at home, or transfer it to another bank. The banks that allowed Iranians to open an account required them to go through extra hurdles of passport and security checks. Banking obstacles in response to the sanctions have been previously reported among Iranian students in the United States (National Iranian American Council, 2020), Canada (Mobasher, 2018), and elsewhere.

The banking and visa challenges created a sense of inferiority and perceptions of discrimination among Iranians. When they compared themselves to other international students, they realized that peers from the EU did not experience obstacles similar to theirs in obtaining visas, finding jobs, and opening bank accounts. People perceive a situation as discriminatory and experience identity threat once they realize that they are being categorized and negatively treated based on their group membership (Branscombe et al., 1999), as was reported by the Iranian students in our study.

Iranians might have experienced relative deprivation, which is defined as "a judgment that one or one's in-group is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent, and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement" (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015, p. 2). The feeling of being relatively

deprived is salient to how Iranian students felt when they compared themselves to EU students.

Our findings highlight the significance of considering visa and banking challenges that have created mental health problems among Iranian students abroad and indicate that international students' challenges extend far beyond micro level aspects, and macro level policies require allocation of more attention.

Impact of Currency Crisis in Iran on Mental Health

Our study represents one of the few studies that provides an understanding of the impact of the currency crisis on Iranian students' mental health, with the broader intention to inform about the adverse consequences of economic sanctions on students' adaptation and mental health abroad. This study contributes to literature as it has analyzed a critical phenomenon that deserves closer attention.

A majority of the Iranian students moved to Hungary with their parents' financial support and with at least half the price of the current value of the Iranian currency. Following the economic crisis, Iranian students' financial situation has become so dire that it has caused anxiety and depression among them. Students were in a rush to find jobs, and many decided to return home. International students in China (Shi, 2016), Venezuela (Valverde & Hemlock, 2015), and South Korea (McNeill, 2009) have reported facing currency crisis challenges akin to Iranian students' challenges in Hungary.

Similar to the visa and banking challenges in the host country, the currency crisis in the sending country proved to significantly impact the adaptation of Iranian international students in our study. This finding is in line with Ward and Geeraert's (2016) model that posits the significance of ecological context in both the host and home countries.

Notwithstanding all the challenges Iranian students face, they have remained strong. However, these challenges will continue to get worse for them, especially after the increased levels of the Iran-US conflict in January 2020, which followed additional U.S. sanctions against Iran (Timofeev, 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic², all of which occurred after our interviews.

Positive and Negative Changes in Psychological Well-Being

A majority of participants in our study felt that their psychological health had improved, their anxieties declined over time, and they were happy to be in Hungary. Only a few participants felt mentally worse in the second interview. The findings of our study are consistent with previous studies (Hechanova-Alampay et al. 2002; Hirai et al., 2015; Ward et al., 1998), in which the adaptation of international students enhanced over time.

² The Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis exacerbated Iran's economic crisis as it led to a further depreciation of the rial (Wallace, 2020).

Inconsistent with our findings, Cemalcilar and Falbo (2008) reported that the psychological well-being of international students in the United States significantly decreased over time. On one hand, our findings indicated that mental health of a majority of participants improved over time while on the other hand, it demonstrated a decline in the mental health of a few Iranians. Thus, Thakar's (2010) result is more compatible with our findings, as the author found significant variations in the mental health trajectories of international students from India in the United States.

Participants in the current study reported that the currency crisis had a negative impact on their well-being. It is important to note that while a majority of the students expressed their sadness and anxiety regarding the currency crisis and the psychosocial challenges they experienced; as a result, a majority remained positive overall. They believed that their mental health was better in Hungary than in Iran due to a range of factors, including more freedom, independence, sociopolitical stability, and better economic and career prospects.

Additionally, participants' negative or positive feelings could be associated with whether they made an upward comparison with out-group members or a downward comparison with their in-group members (Martinot & Redersdorff, 2006). In our study, students seemed to report more negative emotions when they made an upward comparison with the situations of other international students, especially those from EU countries. They also reported more positive emotions when they adopted a downward comparison with circumstances back home in Iran, where they would be less satisfied with the sociopolitical and economic situations relative to Hungary.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. One is the rate of participant attrition, as many students had to leave Hungary due to the currency crisis. Another limitation relates to the limitations inherent in content analysis techniques. We had the difficult task of deciding on which sets of categories and themes to focus on from those that emerged through the content analysis. Other potential themes were set aside for later consideration, and only themes related to sociopolitical and economic conditions in Iran were analyzed.

Implications and Conclusion

This study provides relevant information to various sectors (such as governments, the EU, and the United Nations) about the challenges confronting Iranian international students. Understanding these challenges by these sectors could help with policy reforms designed to improve the students' situations.

Iranian students' challenges also have negative long term implications for universities across Hungary. Over time, they will face a decline in enrollment of new international students who contribute to social, cultural, and economic growth in Hungary. Consequently, they need to continue to support international

students who experience challenges, especially when they are fundamentally political (Todoran & Peterson, 2019).

This research has focused primarily on the psychosocial adaptation trajectory and challenges faced by Iranian students in Hungary. Our research indicates the negative impacts of visas, banking, and currency crisis challenges (due to sanctions on Iran) on Iranian students' mental health. These challenges have been shown to create negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, uncertainty, perceived discrimination, identity threat, and relative deprivation among the students. We hope this study contributes to policy changes and is useful for the policy sectors. If these challenges persist, students' mental health might decline, and more complex interventions may be needed to ameliorate the adverse impact.

Additionally, to better understand international students' adaptation processes, future studies are encouraged to address the broader ecological context of intercultural contacts. Ward and Geeraert (2016) acknowledged the importance of the home and host cultures' ecological contexts on the familial, institutional, and societal levels. Factors such as sanctions, visas, and banking issues operate within a broader ecological context that impacts acculturation and adaptation of international students. We argue there is an essential gap in the literature concerning this specific group since few studies have considered the broader ecological context. There is also a paucity of longitudinal studies on the negative impacts of challenges on Iranian international students' mental health as a result of sanctions on Iran.

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