

**A study of adaptation and resilience of Bhutanese students in Australia**

Authors	Abstract
<p>Nayan Pradhan, Associate Lecturer, Norbuling Rigter College, Royal University of Bhutan.</p> <p>Sudev Mariyil, Senior Lecturer, Norbuling Rigter College, Royal University of Bhutan.</p> <p><b>Key words:</b></p> <p>Social support, cultural adjustment, intercultural communication, academic success, community integration. resilience, adaptation</p>	<p>Bhutanese students face challenges when studying abroad in Australia. Their adaptation and resilience are influenced by cultural differences, language barriers, academic pressures, and social integration. Understanding their experiences is crucial for developing effective support systems and promoting successful outcomes. A web-based survey gathered data from 116 Bhutanese students revealing correlations between survivability and variables such as language proficiency, cultural adaptation, social support, and academic performance. These findings underscore the vital role of language proficiency and cultural adaptation in fostering resilience among acculturating Bhutanese students which is valuable information for policymakers and educators given the increase in Bhutanese students going to Australia.</p>

**Introduction**

In recent years, post-secondary education has witnessed a remarkable growth in international students migrating to Australia. "In 2022, Australia approved 5,523 visas for Bhutanese students, according to the Foreign Affairs Department of Australia, a notable contrast to the 1,447 visas granted between 2019 and 2020, before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This number represented the fifth-largest source of students from anywhere else in the world. The Australian government anticipates that more than 60 percent of these students, enrolled across 42 universities, will seek to prolong their stay in Australia upon completing their studies."(developer, 2023). This increase in Bhutanese students choosing Australia for their post-secondary education reflects the growing recognition of Australia as a favourable study destination. The availability of diverse courses, quality education, and a welcoming environment for international students have contributed to Australia's appeal as a study destination for Bhutanese. This migration pattern has drawn notice due to its possible effects on the Bhutanese economy. In a presentation on "Brain Drain, Brain Circulation, and Brain Gain" at the Centre for Bhutan and Gross

National Happiness Studies (CBS) on August 7, 2023, Professor Dr. Fazal Rizvi said that Australia has about 400,000 international students in its 42 universities. Despite Bhutan's population of 700,000, it is the fifth largest source of students, and he stressed the interconnection between the migration trends and the idea of 'brain drain', which initially referred to the departure of highly trained people from lower-income to higher-income nations, which is especially concerning. He also suggested that Bhutanese authorities document and establishes initiatives to explore these areas. (developer, 2023)

Studying overseas is not as simple as it seems. Leaving your home country and travelling to a different place with new people and a distinct culture becomes challenging. However, the skills and opportunities that studying abroad offers are worth it and can greatly benefit pupils' personal and professional development. A study on Mongolian students choosing to study in Australia revealed their preference for an English-speaking country with high-quality education while noting the challenges of adapting to a new culture (Shah et al., 2020). To have a better future, most Bhutanese youth had the mindset of going abroad and earning while learning. These will help them gain a better understanding of diverse cultural differences, which will help them increase their level of self-confidence, global-mindedness, patience, assertiveness, maturity, self-awareness, flexibility, and adaptability. Overall, the decision to study abroad in a country like Australia can be a life-changing experience that provides students with valuable skills, knowledge, and cultural understanding. Given the increasing trend of Bhutanese students migrating to Australia for higher education and the potential consequences of this migration on Bhutan's economy, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive study to understand the variables that influence the survivability and resilience of these students in Australia. Such a study would not only provide insights into the challenges faced by Bhutanese students in Australia but also help identify measures that can be taken to support them.

## Literature Review

A study by Cynthia Louise Karl (1990) used an applied research technique to examine the factors affecting international student adjustment in the United States by addressing specific problems or issues in real-world contexts by utilising existing knowledge and theories to develop practical solutions. The study revealed that facilitating the learning and adjustment of international students in American colleges and universities is crucial. By ensuring their readiness before arrival, placing them in suitable classes, providing support during the challenging initial period, and fostering their interest in studies, we can enhance their likelihood of success during their academic journey. Furthermore, excelling academically can yield positive outcomes beyond the realm of education itself.

Factors influencing prospective international students' motivation for overseas study and selection of host countries and institutions were investigated in the study conducted by Nghia, Tran (2015) in the context of Vietnamese students. He used a mixed-mode approach, by interviewing 55 participants to identify

factors influencing their choice of the host country and institution and a content analysis approach suggested 12 factors motivating them to study abroad, 13 factors influencing their choice of the host country and 17 factors influencing their choice of the host institution. In the second phase, the factors identified in the first phase were used to develop a paper-based survey to collect quantitative data from 400 participants. The study found that prospective international students prioritise various factors when selecting a host country and institution. Factors such as the cost of living, employment policies, language fluency, a welcoming environment, and visa procedures were of utmost concern in choosing a host country. Similarly, for selecting a host institution, a friendly environment for international students was the most influential factor, consistently rated high across different participant groups. Other factors considered included tuition fees, support services, scholarship opportunities, and admission criteria, in addition to the convenience of location and facilities.

Abdullah Ahmed Alasmari (2023) explores challenges and social adaptation of international students in Saudi Arabia in a qualitative case study method in which the participants were selected through purposeful sampling and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview had 16 questions without specific answers, meant to learn what the students thought and felt about the challenges they faced while adjusting to life in Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that language barriers were a common challenge for international students, both on-campus with instructors and classmates and off-campus with the general public. This aligns with findings from other studies, indicating that language obstacles extend beyond academic settings and affect students' social lives. The primary cause of these barriers appears to be a lack of proficiency in the host-country language prior to studying abroad. Language barriers are identified as a crucial factor influencing international students' success. Additionally, the study observed that international students experienced culture shock due to differences in lifestyle, religious practices, and languages in Saudi Arabia.

Another study conducted by Adedapo T. Aladegbaiye et al (2022) investigates how the acculturation motivation (AM) of new international students develops over time, and which factors play a role in this development in the context of a Dutch University. The study employed a longitudinal approach based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. They interviewed 25 students from 17 countries three times over eight months. The data were analysed following thematic analysis. As part of social factors, the study revealed three types of friendship networks: those with international and domestic friends, those with only international friends, and those with only friends from their own countries. Participants with diverse friendships, spanning both domestic and international groups, exhibited higher levels of intercultural adaptability compared to those without such diversity. Their varied friend circles exposed them to intercultural interactions, fostering a willingness to engage in intercultural academic and social activities. Conversely, participants with exclusively international friendships showed limited interest in engaging with local students. Similarly,

those with solely native country friendships reported minimal engagement outside their cultural groups, primarily maintaining academic and social ties within their community.

### **Conceptual framework**

Migration often serves as a family's strategy to improve their social status. By moving to another country, families aim to access better job opportunities and ensure a brighter future for their children by offering them enhanced educational prospects unavailable in their home countries. (Anil AL Rebholz 2014). Another crucial aspect of migrants' strategies for social upward mobility involves the acknowledgement or dismissal of the skills and resources (cultural, social, and economic capital) they bring with them from their home countries. Many migrant families encounter the devaluation and loss of their social and cultural capital because these assets are not acknowledged in the prevailing culture of the host society (Tepecik 2009, 381). In addition to the devaluation of migrants' social and cultural assets, they also face discrimination from the dominant cultures in the host country's occupational and professional systems, restricting their access to job markets. What was once considered temporary study abroad is now seen as a form of labour migration (Robertson 2013; Tremblay 2005). Survivability of Bhutanese students in Australia involves examining various factors influencing their ability to adapt, persist, and succeed in the Australian educational and cultural context. The use of multiple regression analysis can help identify the significant predictors of survivability and understand the relationships among different variables.

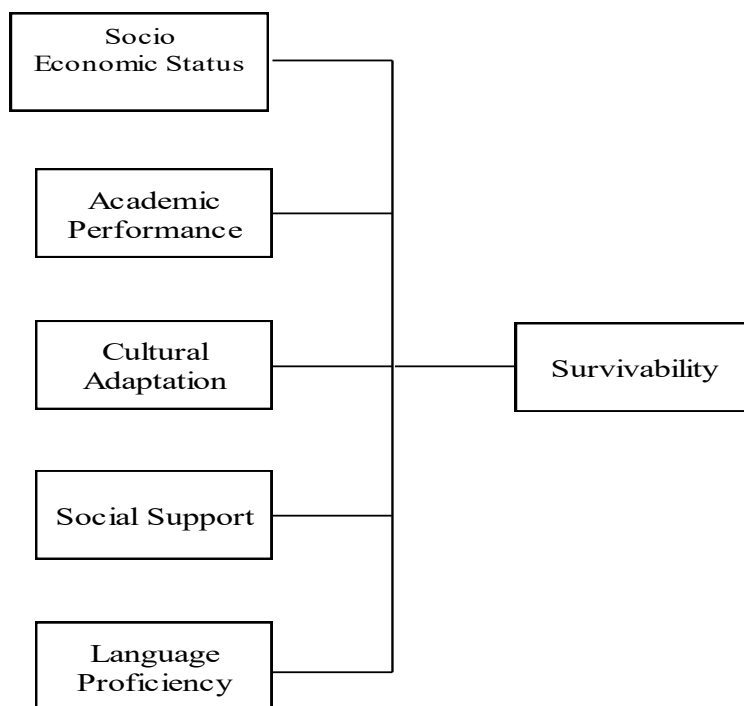
### **Dependent Variable: Survivability**

Survivability can be considered as the overall ability of Bhutanese students to thrive and succeed in Australia, encompassing Socio-Economic Status, Academic Performance, Cultural Adaptation, Social Support, and Language Proficiency.

### **Independent Variables**

Socio-Economic Status, Academic performance, Cultural Adaptation, Social Support, Language proficiency.

**Figure 1**  
Conceptual framework



A comprehensive study is necessary to understand the factors that influence the adaptability and resilience of Bhutanese students in Australia. Furthermore, this research will help in creating better support systems and policies to ensure the success and well-being of Bhutanese students in Australia.

### Problem statement

The growing trend of Bhutanese students migrating to Australia for tertiary education raises concerns about the potential impact on Bhutan's economy due to "brain drain." Therefore, it is essential to address the variables that influence the survivability and resilience of Bhutanese students in Australia. Understanding these variables can be crucial for both countries. Conducting a study on these variables can gain insights into the challenges faced by Bhutanese students in Australia and identify opportunities to enhance their well-being, success, and overall contribution to their home country and the global community (Subedi et al., 2019).

### Significance of the Study

This study offers insights for Bhutanese authorities and students aspiring to pursue careers in Australia. Understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by Bhutanese students in Australia can help policymakers develop targeted initiatives and support systems while allowing students to plan accordingly. This study is particularly relevant because it addresses the existing research gap regarding the psychosocial needs and well-being of Bhutanese youth (Cardeli et al., 2020).

**Objectives**

The study has been undertaken to identify and analyse the key variables that affect the survivability and resilience of Bhutanese students in Australia. It also seeks to determine the variations in students' perceptions of how those variables impact their ability to thrive.

**Method**

A web-based survey method has been applied for the current study.

**Population**

The population for the current study comprises Bhutanese students who are currently studying in Australia. Using the purposive selection approach, a sample of 116 college students was chosen to meet the study's goals.

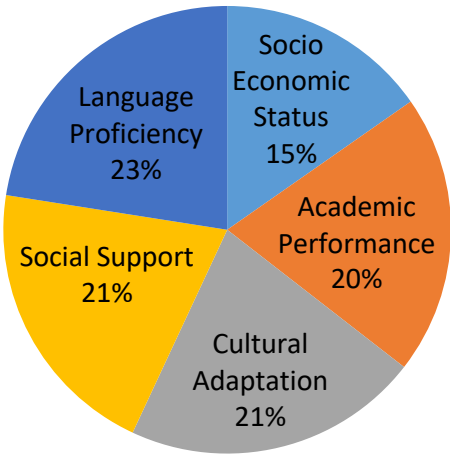
**Tool:** A questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions was used. 5-point Likert scale questions were used to measure the respondents' perceptions and experiences of various factors contributing to the survivability of Bhutanese students in Australia where 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "extremely". Additionally, open-ended questions were also given to participants to provide their qualitative experiences.

**Key Findings**

**Table 1.**  
Participants views on the factors affecting the survivability

	Mean	SD
Socio Economic Status	2.40	0.70
Academic Performance	3.16	0.89
Cultural Adaptation	3.35	0.87
Social Support	3.21	0.88
Language Proficiency	3.52	0.84

**Figure 2**  
Factors affecting the survivability

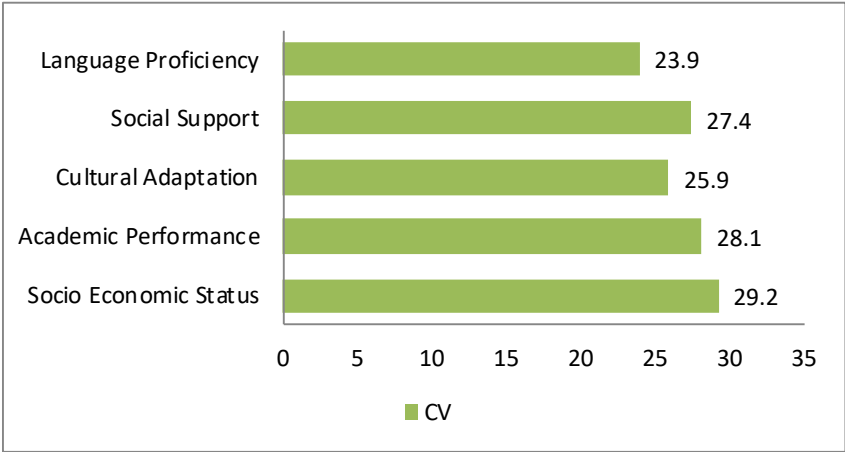


Regarding Socio-Economic Status, respondents, on average, gave it a relatively low importance rating of 2.4 out of 5. This suggests that, overall, respondents did not see Socio-Economic status as a highly crucial factor, and there was moderate variation in their opinions. Moving on to Academic Performance, the average rating was 3.16 out of 5, indicating that respondents perceived academic success as more critical than Socio-Economic status. However, there was greater diversity in opinions, as evidenced by the higher standard deviation. Cultural Adaptation was considered moderately important, receiving an average rating of 3.35 out of 5. Respondents acknowledged the significance of cultural adaptation for Bhutanese students in Australia, and opinions displayed a moderate level of variability. Social Support had an average rating of 3.21 out of 5, suggesting that respondents deemed it moderately important for students' survivability. The responses showed moderate variability, indicating diverse perspectives on the role of social support. Language Proficiency received the highest average rating of 3.52 out of 5, indicating that respondents viewed proficiency in the language as relatively crucial. Similar to other factors, opinions varied moderately, as reflected in the standard deviation.

**Table 2.**  
Coefficient of variation

Variables	CV
Socio Economic Status	29.2
Academic Performance	28.1
Cultural Adaptation	25.9
Social Support	27.4
Language Proficiency	23.9

**Figure 3**  
Coefficient of variation



The analysis of key variables reveals noteworthy insights into the studied population. Socio-Economic Status exhibits a moderate level of variability with a coefficient of variation (CV) of 29.2 percent, indicating diverse economic conditions among individuals or groups. Academic Performance follows closely with a CV of 28.1 percent, suggesting a moderate degree of variability in academic achievements. Cultural Adaptation demonstrates a relatively lower variability at 25.9 percent, hinting at a more consistent level of cultural adaptation within the sample. Social Support, with a CV of 27.4 percent, shows a moderate range of perceived support, reflecting differences in social connections among participants. On the other hand, Language Proficiency displays a lower variability at 23.9 percent, suggesting a more uniform level of language skills. These findings illuminate the diverse nature of socio-economic factors, academic achievements, cultural adaptation, social support, and language proficiency within the examined population, providing valuable insights for further exploration and understanding of these crucial aspects.

A multiple regression analysis in Excel with the dependent variable as the survivability of Bhutanese students in Australia and the independent variables as Socio-Economic status, Academic Performance, Cultural adaptation, Social support, and Language Proficiency provided the following results:

**Table 3.**  
Regression statistics

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.84
R Square	0.71
Adjusted R Square	0.69
Standard Error	0.38
Observations	116



	Coefficients	Standard Error	P-value	t stat
Intercept	-0.34	0.296	0.24755	-1.16
Socio Economic Status	0.02	0.050	0.685311	0.41
Academic Performance	0.23	0.120	0.059965	1.90
Cultural Adaptation	0.37	0.093	0.000122	3.98
Social Support	0.18	0.069	0.008537	2.68
Language Proficiency	0.31	0.064	0.000005	4.80

## Overall Fit of the Model

The value of 0.84 as a multiple correlation coefficient suggests a strong positive linear relationship between the combination of the independent variables (Socio-economic status, Academic Excellence, Cultural Adaptation, Social Support, and Language Proficiency) and the dependent variable (Survivability of Bhutanese in Australia).

The value of the coefficient of determination,  $R^2 = 0.71$  means that approximately 71% of the variability in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables in the model. The adjusted  $R^2$  accounts for the number of predictors in the model and adjusts the  $R^2$  accordingly. Here, it is 0.69. The high  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  values suggest that the model does a good job of explaining the variability in the survivability of Bhutanese in Australia.

## Individual Predictor Significance

**Socio-economic Status ( $p = 0.69$ ):** The high p-value suggests that Socio-economic Status is not a statistically significant predictor in the model at the 95% confidence level.

**Academic Excellence ( $p = 0.06$ ):** With a p-value of 0.06, Academic Excellence is marginally significant, but it falls short of the conventional significance level of 0.05.

**Cultural Adaptation ( $p = 0.0001$ ):** Developing relationships with people in the host country helps international students learn about the host culture, norms, and expectations; experience less acculturative stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015)

Cultural Adaptation is highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that it is a strong predictor of survivability.

**Social Support ( $p = 0.009$ ):** According to Takuya Kojima (2020), Social support has become as important as academic support for international students at Australian universities. Today, social support is often seen as an add-on outside international students' day-to-day living routines. For instance, a cultural mentor program, social clubs, counselling services, and an international student welcome support desk at an airport are available. These types of social support expect international students to be proactive and utilise such

opportunities and services voluntarily. Yet, doing so is becoming harder and harder for them due to “greater time pressures, a larger range of courses and accompanying time-tabling complexities, and the growth of casual and part-time jobs in the 24/7 economy” (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, p. 672).

As per the analysis, social support is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, suggesting its importance in predicting survivability.

**Language Proficiency ( $p = 0.000005$ ):** Statically, language proficiency has high significance indicating a strong association with survivability.

## Coefficients

**Intercept (-0.34):** The intercept represents the estimated survivability when all independent variables are zero. In this context, it might not have a practical interpretation, but it's included for mathematical completeness.

**Socio-economic Status (0.02):** This coefficient suggests that for a one-unit increase in socio-economic status, survivability increases by 0.02-units. However, since the variable is not statistically significant, this interpretation should be made with caution.

**Academic Excellence (0.23):** A one-unit increase in Academic Excellence is associated with a 0.23-unit increase in survivability.

**Cultural Adaptation (0.37):** Cultural Adaptation has the highest coefficient, indicating a strong positive impact on survivability. A one-unit increase in Cultural Adaptation is associated with a 0.37-unit increase in survivability.

**Social Support (0.18):** Similar to Academic Excellence, a one-unit increase in Social Support is associated with a 0.18-unit increase in survivability.

**Language Proficiency (0.31):** Language Proficiency also has a strong positive impact. A one-unit increase in Language Proficiency is associated with a 0.31-unit increase in survivability.

**Standard Error:** The standard errors indicate the average amount that the coefficients are likely to vary from the estimated values. Lower standard errors generally suggest more precise estimates.

For all variables, except Cultural Adaptation, the standard errors seem relatively low, indicating a relatively precise estimation of their coefficients.

In summary, Cultural Adaptation, Social Support, and Language Proficiency appear to be significant predictors of the survivability of Bhutanese in Australia according to this model. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results, especially for Socio-economic Status, which is not statistically significant. Additionally, while the model explains a substantial portion of the variability, there may be other factors influencing survivability that are not included in the analysis.

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