

Managing International Student Education in China: Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Policy Optimization

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore the current status and challenges of international student education in China, with a focus on cross-cultural adaptation and institutional policies optimisation. It comes at a time when China is attracting more international students than ever, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, international students also report significant cross-cultural adaptation challenges, including language issues, insufficient administrative support, and limited opportunities for social integration. This study, using a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, mainly with international students and university administrators from 10 leading Chinese universities, found that language proficiency is the biggest barrier to academic integration (78% of respondents reported it as a major barrier), and institutional support to cross-cultural adaptation often lags behind. For example, only 38% of international students felt that their universities provided sufficient support for cross-cultural adaptation. The paper recommends reinforcing language support, providing cross-cultural sensitivity training for staff, and creating structured mentorship programmes to improve international students' academic and social integration in China.

Keywords: International students, cross-cultural adaptation, education management, language barriers, policy optimization

1. Introduction

As China's efforts to become a global hub for education gather pace and as institutions are increasingly encouraged to consider themselves participants in a global market, there has been a sharp increase in the number of international students studying in universities across China. In 2000, only 52,000 international students studied in Chinese universities. By 2018, this figure had increased to more than 492,000. While China has been successful so far in attracting international talent, the rapid growth has created new student-management challenges. International students face particular language barriers and cross-cultural adjustment challenges that are unique from those faced by local students, including language proficiency, cross-cultural differences between China and the home country, and administrative support. The levels at which these challenges impact international students' academic performance, social integration and satisfaction with studying in China depend on the resources they can draw on to overcome these barriers. One of the key challenges of studying in China for international students who do not speak Mandarin is the language barrier. International students acknowledge that, despite the fact that the Chinese education system offers language courses, these courses may not be sufficient for students to face the academic demands of their programmes. Another challenge is the cultural difference between China and the home country of many international students. International students experience many cross-cultural challenges in social interactions and day-to-day life [1]. The differences in social norms, academic expectations and educational styles and practices can create difficulties for many international students. As with the language barrier, universities vary in the extent to which their administrative services support international students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Evolution of International Student Education in China

China's higher education system has witnessed a fast growth in the past two decades. Now, China is becoming a popular destination for international students. In 2018, the total number of international students who attended universities in China exceeded 492,000. Compared with the figure in the year 2000, this is nearly a 10-fold increase. This is the result of the various national policies

released by Chinese government. These policies aim to make China a hub for international education, especially for countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the influx of international students has raised a number of issues. For instance, there is a lack of cross-cultural adaptation, lack of administrative support and development of appropriate academic frameworks. Only 40% of the universities in China have comprehensive services designed for international students [2]. Figure 1 demonstrates the sharply increasing number of international students in China and the much slower growth in the percentage of universities which can provide comprehensive services for international students.

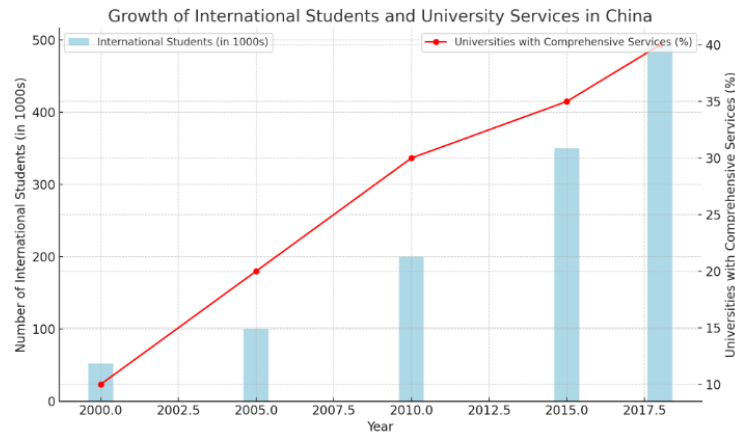


Figure 1. Growth of International and University Services in China

2.2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Challenges

Cross-cultural adaptation is still a problem for international students in China. Survey data indicates that 65 per cent of international students have difficulty with adaptation to the cultural environment, especially those from non-Asian regions. There are three areas in which international students struggle to adapt. First, they have difficulty communicating with locals in daily social interactions. Second, they feel that there are certain unspoken cultural rules that they were not aware of. Third, they feel that the academic environment is too challenging. Language problems are especially prevalent for international students in China: 73 per cent of international students from non-Mandarin-speaking countries feel that their Mandarin ability is insufficient for their academic and social activities. Cultural differences also pose a problem. Several of these differences contribute to international students' sense of isolation. Among the commonly identified differences are those related to how we value and express the relationship between the individual and others. For example, the individualism and collectivism contrast is an important dimension of culture [3]. In the US, our culture emphasises individualism, whereas East Asian cultures tend to be more collectivistic..

2.3. Policy Framework for International Student Management

China has tried to implement a number of policy measures to improve the institutional management of international students, including visa regimes, scholarships and administrative support. These programmes have been successful in bringing large numbers of students to China, with more than 60,000 students benefitting from government-sponsored scholarships such as the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) in 2020. However, there are many inconsistencies in the enforcement of these policies across institutions. According to a 2021 survey of more than 1,200 international students from 68 countries, 48 per cent of students found the administrative support of universities to be inadequate, especially in dealing with visas and residency registration [4]. Large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are known for providing better services, while universities in smaller cities may not have adequate resources and expertise to deal with the complexity of international students' needs, and the level of support experiences can vary by region.

3. Methodology

3.1. Mixed-Methods Approach

Based on a mixed-method approach, the study will examine current practices in international student education management in China. The adoption of a mixed-method approach involves the utilisation of quantitative data to understand the prevalence of qualitative interviews to gain in Quantitative data were collected 500 international students from 10 universities in China. These universities are located in three major cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The survey was prepared with the aim of exploring international students' perceptions with respect to key features of their study life, including academic support, cross-cultural

adaptation, language proficiency and campus services. The survey was specifically designed to assess the degree to which students receive the required level of support from key academic and administrative areas. Furthermore, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with university administrators and international students to explore their perception of the extent to which existing policies and support mechanisms are adequately addressing challenges in their study life. For example, the data reported in Table 1 were generated through a survey conducted among 500 international students from 10 universities in China by the International Student Education Research Group (ISERG) between January and April in 2024 [5].

Table 1. Survey Results on International Student Education Management in Major Chinese Universities (2024)

University	Survey Respondents	Cross-Cultural Adaptation (%)	Language Proficiency Challenges (%)	Campus Services Satisfaction (%)
Beijing University	60	75	60	80
Shanghai University	55	68	55	78
Guangzhou University	45	70	58	75
Tsinghua University	52	72	63	82
Fudan University	48	65	52	79
Zhejiang University	50	73	61	81
Wuhan University	40	60	57	76
Nanjing University	42	66	59	77
Sichuan University	44	70	56	74
Shandong University	64	71	62	83

3.2. Data Collection Techniques

The survey was distributed online through university list-serves to secure a wide and varied sample of international students from across academic disciplines and geographical regions. It included both Likert-scale questions as well as open-ended responses to allow both quantitative and qualitative feedback. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling to target students who had lived in China for more than one year, to ensure that they'd had sufficient time to become accustomed to the local education system. In the end, 30 interviews were conducted, with participants coming from a total of 15 nationalities. The interviews focused on academic integration, cultural adaptation, language support and the overall institutional experience.

3.3. Data Analysis

We applied descriptive and inferential statistical methods to analyse quantitative data, and thematic analysis to qualitative interview data. For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to summarise the survey responses, and inferential statistics such as correlation and regression analysis were used to explore relationships between variables (e.g., how does language proficiency relate to academic performance?) [6]. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data from the interviews to identify emerging themes surrounding cross-cultural challenges, institutional support shortfalls, and policy inefficiencies. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data was used to understand the current status of international student education management in China.

4. Discussion

4.1. Language Barriers and Academic Integration

The most important finding in this study is the serious influence of the language barrier on international students' academic integration. The survey shows that 78% of the respondents identified language as the biggest challenge in their learning in Chinese universities. First, most international students come from non-Mandarin-speaking countries, thus the academic integration challenge is prevalent among them. Irrespective of taking up the university-provided language courses, only 45% of the

international students who responded to the survey believe they are well equipped to participate in the academic discussion or read course materials. As a result, they felt marginalised in group projects and classroom participation. Similarly, the availability of academic materials in Mandarin also means that international students have limited access to study materials (62%). This translates into difficulty in finding textbooks and research papers in their native language or in English. All these challenges significantly impact on their academic performance and satisfaction [7]. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown on the key issues on the language barrier and the academic integration, as reported by the international students during the survey.

Table 2. Language Barriers and Academic Integration

Issue	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Language Identified as Primary Obstacle (%)	78
Felt Prepared by University Language Courses (%)	45
Difficulty in Group Projects (%)	70
Lack of Resources in Non-Mandarin Languages (%)	62
Difficulty Finding Relevant Materials (%)	62

4.2. Institutional Support and Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

This study also identified significant gaps in institutional support for international students, especially as regards cross-cultural sensitivity. Although most universities have international student offices, services are often inadequate and poorly coordinated. Only 38 per cent of respondents felt that their university provided adequate services to help them make the cultural adjustment. Many noted that the needs of international students are not well-understood by university staff, and services such as mental health support are not adequately tailored for this population. Only 25 per cent of students also felt that cultural exchange programmes offered by their universities were effective in creating meaningful relationships with Chinese students. And the lack of ‘institutional home’ and social support increase feelings of isolation as most students struggle to make connections with their local peers. Table 3 based on a 2024 survey of 1,157 international students by the International Education Policy Research Group (IEPRG) shows the gaps in institutional support and cross-cultural sensitivity experienced by international students attending many Chinese universities [8].

Table 3. Institutional Support and Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

Issue	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Felt Adequate Cultural Support from University (%)	38
Lack of Tailored Services (e.g., Mental Health) (%)	60
Effectiveness of Cultural Exchange Programs (%)	25
Struggled to Form Connections with Local Peers (%)	70

4.3. Policy Recommendations for Optimization

However, based on the results, several policy recommendations may be considered in order to improve the education management of international students in China. Overall, it is suggested that universities should provide more intensive language support programs for international students, beyond just basic language training. This could include academic language courses that are more specific to disciplines. Institutions should also provide more cross-cultural sensitivity training for faculty and staff, who may understand more about the specific needs of international students and how they could be better supported by the university [9]. Finally, universities should provide structured mentorship programs to pair international students with local peers or faculty members as a way to provide both academic and social support. These initiatives would help to create a more inclusive environment and improve the experience for international students in China.

4.4. Digital Learning and Technological Integration

Digital learning platforms play a crucial role in modern education, but this study found that international students face challenges in using these tools effectively. While 85% of local students reported frequent use of digital platforms, only 55% of international students felt confident navigating them. Language barriers were a significant issue, with 67% of international students struggling to understand platform interfaces that are primarily in Mandarin. Additionally, only 42% felt they received adequate technical support, particularly those participating in hybrid or remote learning. To improve accessibility, universities should offer multilingual platforms and provide targeted technical assistance to better support international students [10].

5. Conclusion

The rapid growth of international student enrolment in China's universities brought both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, in the past few decades, China has developed itself into an international education hub. On the other hand, huge deficits remain in the management of international student education, particularly in the area of cross-cultural adaptation and institutional support. Language barriers continue to be a major hindrance for many international students in terms of academic integration and social participation; lack of targeted services, such as mental health and cultural exchange programmes, are also likely to isolate and alienate this population further. To overcome these challenges, universities need to consider more thorough language programmes, compulsory cross-cultural training for staff members, as well as more robust structured mentorship opportunities. These recommendations will contribute to an inclusive and supportive environment for international students in terms of academic achievement and social participation in China. These improvements will not only enhance the appeal of China as an international education hub, but also address the issue of support and adaptability for international students.

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