

Cross-Cultural Communication and Educational Challenges: A Review of Research on Students Studying in China

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Abstract. The cross-cultural adaptation and academic experience of international students studying in China have received widespread attention in recent years. This article analyzes the cross-cultural communication and educational adaptation issues of international students in Chinese universities. Research has found that the main difficulties faced by international students studying in China are concentrated in four aspects: language barriers, cross-cultural adaptation obstacles, mismatched teaching modes, and inadequate and administrative support. The underlying reasons mainly involve differences in language and cultural competence, imperfect university system construction, and limited social and cultural environment support. The study also found that there are significant differences in the difficulty level of adaptation among international students from different countries and regions of origin, which need to be studied separately. Based on the above research results, this article proposes that universities should strengthen language and cross-cultural training before enrollment, improve the international student support service system, and promote cross-cultural classroom teaching reform to enhance the learning experience and cross-cultural adaptation ability of international students, while providing a reference for developing countries to promote the internationalization of higher education.

1 Introduction

The current era of globalization has profoundly reshaped the landscape of higher education in the world. The free flow of knowledge, capital, and human resources across borders has made internationalization of higher education no longer just a lofty vision, but an inevitable choice for countries to strengthen global competitiveness, cultural soft power, and cultural influence [1]. International student mobility, as one of the most significant and quantifiable dimensions of internationalization in higher education, has experienced unprecedented growth in the past two decades. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the number of internationally mobile students worldwide exceeded 6.9 million in 2022, nearly tripling from around 2.1 million in 2000. This significant growth not only reflects the

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increasing demand for cross-border education opportunities but also the fierce competition among countries to attract international talent to promote innovation, diplomacy, and economic development [2].

In history, the global mobility of international students has mainly been one-way, flowing from developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to higher education hubs such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Western Europe [3]. These traditional study abroad destinations have long dominated the international education market with their renowned university systems, English-taught courses, well-equipped facilities, and promising graduate employment prospects for graduates. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, international student destinations to study abroad showed a significant trend of diversification, with some emerging economies, such as China, rapidly rising and becoming important participants in the global higher education sector [4].

However, increasing evidence suggests that the rapid growth in the number of international students enrolled in China has not been accompanied by corresponding improvements in the quality of educational experience and cross-cultural support [5]. Numerous studies have documented ongoing challenges in areas such as language barriers, cultural adaptation, teaching differences, social integration, and institutional support. These challenges have significantly reduced the overall satisfaction and academic performance of international students studying in China in many cases [6]. The gap between the quantitative success of China's international student enrollment work and the students' own learning experience constitutes a key issue worthy of systematic academic research attention. Accordingly, this article will analyze the main challenges faced by international students studying in China in cross-cultural communication and educational adaptation, and further explore their causes and feasible solutions, in order to provide a reference for the development of international education in developing countries' universities.

2 Problem analysis

Through thematic literature analysis, the challenges encountered by international students in China mainly fall into four categories: language barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, mismatched teaching modes, and inadequate institutional and administrative support. The following section elaborates on each type of challenge in detail.

2.1 Language barriers

Language barriers significantly constrain the academic performance, social network development, and mental health of international students studying in China. First, in academic settings, many international students may be able to handle daily communication, but they struggle with deep academic activities such as classroom discussions, academic paper writing, and professional literature reading. In all-English teaching programs, students often feel confused due to poor teaching communication, resulting in a significant reduction in teaching effectiveness [6]. Second, language barriers directly affect the construction of international students' social networks. As Andrade pointed out in his research, international students who are unable to communicate effectively are more likely to fall into social isolation, which can lead to negative mental health states such as anxiety and loneliness. This finding has also been fully validated in the Chinese context [7].

The underlying reasons mainly lie in the inherent complexity of the Chinese language, limitations of assessment mechanisms, and deficiencies in language teaching provision. As a tonal language, Chinese possesses a sophisticated writing system, unique grammatical rules, and rich dialect varieties, all of which create substantial obstacles for students from non-Chinese cultural backgrounds [6]. In addition, there are limitations to the existing admission

criteria in the evaluation mechanism. Although many students have passed the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) before enrollment, there is a significant gap between the standardized "everyday language" measured by it and the "cognitive academic language" required for university studies [8]. At the same time, in terms of teaching, the quality and faculty of English-taught programs vary greatly. Some university teachers have limited English academic expression ability or frequently switch to Chinese in actual teaching, which directly leads to language difficulties in English-taught programs [6].

2.2 Cultural adaptation

Cultural adaptation is another major challenge faced by international students studying in China. The "integration strategy" has significant advantages in improving students' satisfaction, and its adaptation outcomes are deeply influenced by individual perceptions of "cultural distance" or "cultural novelty" [9]. This process is not a static outcome, but a multidimensional dynamic process that includes psychological adjustment and socio-cultural adaptation, and is particularly embodied in the interplay between academic interaction and social integration [8].

In the specific context of China, the cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students studying here are unique. There remain substantial differences between Chinese culture and Western cultures, and this deep cultural difference is reflected in various aspects of daily life, such as dietary habits, social etiquette, time management, and the establishment of interpersonal relationships. Kim emphasizes in his integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic spiral process of "pressure-adaptation-growth", in which individuals gradually develop cross-cultural communication skills through repeated interactions with new cultures [10]. However, An and Chiang's research found that many international students in China tend to withdraw rather than take proactive adaptive measures when faced with cultural differences, which is partly related to the limited openness of Chinese society to foreign integration and the lack of cross-cultural preparation training among international students themselves [11]. At the same time, Akhtar et al. specifically studied the cross-cultural adaptation of African students studying in China and found that this group faces particularly severe cultural shock [12]. In addition to common challenges arising from cultural differences, African international students also need to deal with additional social and psychological stressors such as racial discrimination and stereotypes. Some respondents reported experiencing being stared at and rental rejections, and employment discrimination in their daily lives, which seriously eroded their sense of belonging and mental health. This finding strongly indicates that the nature and degree of cultural adaptation difficulties vary significantly depending on the students' region of origin, and cannot be summarized by a homogeneous experience.

2.3 Mismatched teaching modes

The differences in teaching systems and methods are also one of the problems that lead to the unsatisfactory learning experience of international students. Many international students with different educational backgrounds find that there is a huge gap between the actual teaching mode and their own learning habits after entering the Chinese classroom. International students who are accustomed to participatory learning, such as critical thinking, classroom discussions, and group collaboration, often feel at a loss when facing lecture-style classrooms. At the same time, in multicultural classrooms, it is often difficult to establish efficient teaching interactions between teachers and students. Faced with the different academic traditions and learning expectations of international students, classroom teaching

strategies are often difficult to adjust in a timely manner, which not only reduces their classroom participation but also affects the final learning outcomes.

Analyzing the underlying reasons, these challenges mainly stem from the gap in classroom teaching modes and the insufficient cross-cultural teaching competence of teachers. At the organizational level of teaching, international students often face a mismatch between their learning expectations and local classroom norms during cross-border mobility. Research has shown that some international students studying in China tend to emphasize learner-centered and highly participatory interactive models. However, in actual learning, they often find that classroom organization in Chinese universities tends to be teacher-led and one-way knowledge transmission. This gap between teaching philosophy and practice constitutes an important root cause of their academic adaptation barriers [13]. In addition, in terms of faculty development, the systematic cross-cultural training for university teachers in multicultural classrooms is still weak. In theory, effective cross-cultural teaching competence not only requires the improvement of language skills but also demands that teachers to possess comprehensive professional qualities in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions [14]. However, many Chinese university teachers who have long been accustomed to monocultural domestic teaching environments often lack systematic professional preparation and cross-cultural practical experience when dealing with international students, making it difficult to effectively transform these competencies into supportive teaching strategies in multicultural classrooms.

2.4 Inadequate institutional and administrative support

Andrade's comprehensive research emphasizes that effective institutional support includes admission guidance, academic guidance, mental health counseling, career guidance, and daily administrative services [10]. However, multiple studies on international students studying in China have shown that the support system at Chinese universities remains inadequate, a significant gap exists compared with renowned universities in developed countries. Meanwhile, Wen pointed out that although the Chinese government has invested a large amount of funds through programs such as Chinese government scholarships to attract international students, there are significant shortcomings in the support services provided to students upon arrival [6]. Specific issues include the cumbersome and opaque procedures for visa renewal and residence registration, a lack of mental health services tailored to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of international students, limited academic guidance and support resources, and a severe shortage of internship and employment opportunities. Akhtar et al. also found in their research on African international students that the complexity of administrative procedures and the lack of service awareness and foreign language communication skills among administrative staff are important sources of dissatisfaction and frustration among international students [12].

3 Feasible solutions

In addition, this article will propose some practical and feasible solutions for the four main challenges mentioned above.

3.1 Strengthen cross-cultural training and language preparation programs before enrollment

Universities should institutionalize cross-cultural training and language preparation programs before enrollment and incorporate them into their training system, in order to

reduce the initial adaptation pressure of international students and enhance their long-term academic performance and social integration. Research has shown that systematic preparatory support can help students build a basic awareness of academic norms, classroom interaction methods, and socio-cultural contexts before students officially enter the classroom and campus life, thereby reducing frustration and uncertainty during the adaptation period.

Taking Beijing Language and Culture University as an example, the university has been committed to providing systematic Chinese language preparatory training programs for international students studying in China, integrating language teaching with Chinese cultural experience and community practice. Preliminary results indicate that students who receive such comprehensive preparatory training have faster cultural adaptation speed and classroom participation than their peers who have not received training after formal enrollment [6]. Pedersen pointed out in his review of cross-cultural training that effective cross-cultural preparatory training should cover three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior, rather than merely focus on knowledge delivery. Therefore, in practical implementation, it is recommended to cover all three dimensions of pre-enrollment training: providing necessary information and rule guidance at the cognitive level; on the emotional level, anxiety is alleviated through peer support and psychological expectation management; At the behavioral level, situational exercises are used to enhance practical coping skills, such as role-playing, cultural situational simulations, and other experiential activities. At the same time, language preparation programs should not only train exam-oriented language abilities, but should be linked to real academic tasks and combined with cultural experiences and community practices to help students use language and understand culture in real situations.

3.2 Develop cross-cultural teaching skills and promote classroom teaching reform

In addition, universities should systematically promote cross-cultural teaching reform, combining cross-cultural teaching ability training with classroom teaching mode optimization. Compared to relying solely on students' one-way adaptation, synchronously carrying out structural adjustments from the instructional side is more feasible and sustainable, and can alleviate conflicts between different cultural educational traditions at the source.

In terms of feasibility, existing theories and practices have provided a clear path for such reforms. Che's systematic research on the path to enhancing cross-cultural teaching abilities of university teachers in the context of internationalization points out that measures such as strengthening institutionalized cross-cultural training, reforming teaching methods and tools, establishing a sound support system, and linking evaluation incentives can effectively improve teachers' cross-cultural teaching abilities. This study combines the background of the continuous growth in the number of international students in Chinese universities to demonstrate the practical basis, replication feasibility, and long-term sustainability of these paths [15]. Similar empirical and case studies further support that embedding teacher professional development into the conventional system and combining it with classroom inclusive transformation can produce measurable positive effects, which is superior to the passive mode of relying solely on students' unilateral adaptation.

In terms of specific implementation, it can be promoted from two levels: firstly, at the level of teacher development, cross-cultural teaching and training should be incorporated into the regular training system and linked with teacher evaluation and promotion mechanisms to form institutional incentives; Secondly, at the level of classroom practice, promote the transformation of teaching methods, such as increasing discussion-based and collaborative learning, optimizing assessment methods, reducing reliance on single lectures, etc., to make the classroom more inclusive and interactive. Through the dual path of "ability enhancement

teaching reform", it can more fully respond to the adaptation difficulties caused by the mismatch of teaching systems.

4 Conclusion

This article systematically analyzes the core challenges faced by international students studying in China in cross-cultural communication and educational adaptation. By integrating existing literature, it constructs a multi-level analysis framework covering individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors, and identifies four key issues: language barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, mismatched teaching models, and insufficient institutional and administrative support. The research findings reveal a major contradiction in China's international education work, which is that while significant success has been achieved in terms of the number of international student admissions, there are still persistent shortcomings in the quality of education experience and social integration for many international students. In response to this situation, the article also proposes specific solutions to strengthen language preparation education and deepen classroom teaching reform, aiming to alleviate the adaptation pressure of international students and improve their overall learning experience and academic performance. In addition, the research significance of this article is not limited to the Chinese context. The challenges it explores reflect the universal issues that other developing countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America may face in the rapid internationalization of higher education. As these countries continue to develop their own international student education, China's practical experiences and insights not only provide useful references but also reflect the difficulties that need to be overcome together. Therefore, addressing the above challenges has important reference value for improving the overall educational capacity and level of developing countries to receive international students, and is also the key to promoting the transformation of internationalization of higher education from "scale expansion" to "quality improvement". It also has a profound impact on promoting the cross-cultural and academic achievement of international students themselves.

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