

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL STRESSORS AND THE ADAPTATION OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

FATORES DE ESTRESSE SOCIOLÓGICOS MULTIDIMENSIONAIS E A ADAPTAÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES INTERNACIONAIS CHINESES NO ENSINO SUPERIOR DA MALÁSIA

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Abstract

The global movement of students has significantly increased over the past few decades, with Chinese students forming one of the largest and most vibrant groups seeking education abroad. This phenomenon mirrors the overarching trends of globalization and the societal ambitions linked to obtaining an international education especially in terms of developing cross-cultural skills, fostering global citizenship, and improving employability prospects. Malaysia has become a preferred choice for Chinese students owing to its close geographical location, cultural similarities, affordable tuition fees, and growing international higher education networks. Nevertheless, studying in a foreign sociocultural context brings forth a range of stressors that can impact students' adaptation processes. Chinese international students frequently face challenges such as language difficulties, academic demands, financial limitations, and psychosocial stressors that influence their academic performance and emotional health. Utilizing sociological frameworks related to migration, acculturation, and educational adjustment, this paper reviews existing research to investigate how these various stressors affect students' experiences of adjustment and long-term integration into Malaysian higher education institutions. Additionally, the study underscores the implications for policy and institutional

Resumo

A mobilidade global de estudantes aumentou significativamente nas últimas décadas, sendo que os estudantes chineses constituem um dos maiores e mais dinâmicos grupos que buscam educação no exterior. Esse fenômeno reflete as tendências gerais da globalização e as ambições sociais associadas à obtenção de uma educação internacional, especialmente no que diz respeito ao desenvolvimento de competências interculturais, à promoção da cidadania global e à melhoria das perspectivas de empregabilidade. A Malásia tornou-se uma escolha preferencial para estudantes chineses devido à sua proximidade geográfica, semelhanças culturais, mensalidades acessíveis e redes internacionais de ensino superior em expansão. No entanto, estudar em um contexto sociocultural estrangeiro traz consigo uma série de fatores estressantes que podem impactar os processos de adaptação dos estudantes. Estudantes internacionais chineses frequentemente enfrentam desafios como dificuldades linguísticas, exigências acadêmicas, limitações financeiras e fatores de estresse psicossocial que influenciam seu desempenho acadêmico e saúde emocional. Utilizando marcos sociológicos relacionados à migração, aculturação e adaptação educacional, este artigo analisa as pesquisas existentes para investigar como esses diversos fatores de estresse afetam as experiências de



practices, advocating for inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive approaches to promote successful adaptation for international students.

Keywords: International Students. Acculturation. Coping Measures. Stressors. Higher Education.

adaptação e integração de longo prazo dos estudantes em instituições de ensino superior da Malásia. Além disso, o estudo destaca as implicações para políticas e práticas institucionais, defendendo abordagens inclusivas, solidárias e culturalmente sensíveis para promover a adaptação bem-sucedida dos estudantes internacionais.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes Internacionais. Aculturação. Estratégias de Enfrentamento. Fatores de Estresse. Ensino Superior.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the increasing trend of internationalization, pursuing education abroad has become a prominent aspect of the global higher education framework. Current patterns in international student mobility reflect wider trends in globalization, economic interconnectedness, and the growth of cross-border educational networks. Additionally, it signifies efforts toward cultural exchange, transfer of knowledge, and social advancement across nations. As reported in the International Student Monthly Summary and Data Tables (2024), by April 2024, total global enrolments of international students reached 780,104 an increase of 16% compared to the same period in 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Year-to-date figures for new enrolments amounted to 259,057, marking the highest recorded for this timeframe and representing a 13% increase from March 2019 (229,284). Significantly, more than half (56%) of all international students hailed from five countries: China (21%), India (17%), Nepal (8%), the Philippines (5%), and Vietnam (5%). This distribution highlights the evolving geography of global academic mobility, which is increasingly influenced by emerging Asian economies and an expanding South–South educational movement that are transforming the sociocultural landscape of international education.

Table 1

International Student Data – Full-Year Enrolment and Commencement Figures (Malaysia) (Data finalised as of December 2023)

Indicator	April 2019	April 2024	Change (%)	Remarks
Total Enrolments	672,500	780,104	+16%	Based on year-to-date April data
Total Commencements	229,284	259,057	+13%	Highest on record for this period
Top 5 Source Countries (2024)				% of Total Enrolments
China	–	–	–	21%
India	–	–	–	17%
Nepal	–	–	–	8%
Philippines	–	–	–	5%
Vietnam	–	–	–	5%

Note: Data reflect cumulative international student enrolments and commencements in Malaysia up to April 2024. Percentage changes are calculated relative to the same period in 2019 (pre-COVID-19). **Source:** Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. (2024). *International Student Enrolment Statistics Report*. Government of Malaysia. Finalised December 2023.

This worldwide trend signifies significant changes in educational pathways, indicating that transnational learning is now extending beyond conventional Western locations. New trends in South–South and intra-Asian student mobility are transforming the global higher education environment, challenging the supremacy of Euro-American academic institutions. In this shifting landscape, China has emerged as the largest source of international students globally. Over the last twenty years, the movement of Chinese students has surged due to factors such as rapid economic growth, aspirations from an emerging middle class, heightened competition within domestic education systems, and a strong focus on global skills and employability (Yan & Berliner, 2013).

While nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia continue to be favored destinations for international students, there is an increasing attraction toward regional alternatives that offer English-language instruction at a reasonable cost along with quality institutions and cultural familiarity. Malaysia stands out as a prominent educational hub in Southeast Asia. The country is guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education), which aims to draw 250,000 international students by 2025 an objective that reflects its broader strategy for internationalizing higher education and enhancing global competitiveness.

Several interconnected elements contribute to Malaysia's growing allure for international students, particularly those from China. The nation presents affordable tuition fees, reasonable living expenses, and a stable political climate. Its diverse society which includes Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous groups cultivates an inclusive social atmosphere that resonates culturally with Chinese students. Additionally, internationally recognized branch campuses like Monash University (Australia) and the University of Nottingham (UK) provide opportunities for obtaining globally recognized qualifications without incurring the high costs associated with studying in Western countries (Cheng & Siew, 2022). Geographic closeness to China, shared Confucian educational principles, and deep-rooted historical connections further enhance Malaysia's appeal by offering a "familiar-yet-foreign" academic experience that aligns global ambitions with regional accessibility.

This phenomenon reflects a broader diversification in global academic mobility as Chinese learners increasingly seek options beyond traditional Western locales in favor of regional choices that feel culturally closer. As noted by OECD (2023), higher education plays an expanding role in decreasing youth who are not engaged in employment or education (NEET), leading to intensified international competition for students. Therefore, Malaysia's approach to attracting this demographic transcends mere economic motives. It also embodies its sociocultural and educational commitment to fostering a globally interconnected knowledge society.

Table 2

Percentage of 25-29-year-olds with at least upper secondary attainment in education/not in education, by educational attainment, programme orientation and work status (2022)

Notes	Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary														Tertiary					
	General							Vocational							Not in education					
	In education		NEET					In education		NEET					In education		NEET			
	Employed	Unemployed	Inactive	Total	Total	Total	Employed	Unemployed	Inactive	Total	Total	Total	Employed	Unemployed	Inactive	Total	Total			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5) = (3) + (4)	(6) = (2) + (5)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11) = (9) + (10)	(12) = (8) + (11)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17) = (15) + (16)	(18) = (14) + (17)			
OECD countries																				
Australia	20	62	2.4	15.8	18.2	80	14	71	2.1	12.5	14.6	86	17	75	1.8	5.6	7.4	83		
Austria	51	43		5.2	6.5	49	3	85	3.6	8.2	11.8	97	28	64	2.5	5.0	7.5	72		
Belgium	25	59	5.7	10.8	16.5	75	4	79	11.2	5.0	16.1	96	16	79	1.8	3.2	5.0	84		
Canada	13	66	7.6	13.9	21.4	87	5	82	5.9	6.9	12.7	95	15	76	4.2	4.7	8.9	85		
Chile	31	42	9.6	17.6	27.2	69		68	8.9	22.8	31.8	100	2	74	11.1	13.1	24.2	98		
Colombia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	11	70	11.2	8.1	19.3	89	
Costa Rica	17	51	16.3	15.4	31.7	83	27	43	7.0	22.8	29.8	73	42	47	6.9	4.8	11.7	96		
Czech Republic	23	62	1.7	12.8	14.5	77	4	78	2.4	16.0	18.3	95	16	71	1.2	11.8	13.0	84		
Denmark	55	38	0.9	6.5	7.4	45	13	80	1.9	5.2	7.1	87	22	67	5.9	4.8	10.7	78		
Estonia	17	75	2.2	6.1	8.3	83	7	80	5.9	7.2	13.0	93	18	75	1.8	5.5	7.4	82		
Finland	54	31	5.8	9.6	15.4	46	19	66	4.9	9.9	14.8	81	29	66	2.5	2.5	5.0	71		
France	22	56	9.7	12.2	21.8	78	4	77	7.6	11.5	19.1	96	12	78	6.0	3.7	9.6	88		
Germany	57	30	3.1	9.2	12.3	43	11	81	2.4	5.7	8.1	89	25	69	1.7	3.8	5.5	75		
Greece	35	44	9.1	11.8	20.8	65	1	65	19.7	13.6	33.3	99	16	63	15.1	5.6	20.7	84		
Hungary	18	73	3.7	6.0	9.6	82	2	89	2.7	5.9	8.7	98	12	83	2.3	2.3	4.6	88		
Iceland	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	34	62	c	3.7	4.5	86	
Ireland														90	3.2	2.8	6.0	86		
Israel	38	48	2.9	11.1	13.9	62	m	86	4.0	10.1	14.2	100	20	70	3.3	6.5	9.8	80		
Italy	35	41	7.2	17.4	24.7	65	7	67	10.8	15.4	26.2	93	29	55	6.4	9.9	16.3	71		
Japan	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Korea	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Latvia	6	71	c	15.8	22.6	94	c	73	15.3	c	21.2	95	10	81	c	5.8	9.4	90		
Lithuania	13	70	c	10.6	16.8	87	c	76	3.2	20.9	24.2	100	8	86	4.1	c	5.5	92		
Luxembourg	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	28	66	c	c	72		
Mexico	13	64	3.0	20.1	23.1	87	5	71	5.7	18.4	24.2	95	12	74	4.8	9.7	14.5	88		
Netherlands	55	39	c	3.9	5.4	45	18	76	1.6	4.3	5.9	82	23	73	2.7	1.8	4.5	77		
New Zealand	13	70	3.2	13.9	17.1	87	12	75	4.0	9.5	13.5	88	14	81	2.1	2.8	4.9	86		
Norway	43	45	0.0	12.5	12.5	58	11	84	c	c	c	89	28	69	c	c	3.6	72		
Poland	13	68	3.4	18.1	21.5	87	2	81	3.4	12.8	16.3	98	9	83	2.6	6.0	8.6	91		
Portugal	19	66	5.6	8.8	14.4	81	9	78	5.5	8.1	13.6	91	15	75	7.3	2.6	9.8	85		
Slovak Republic	14	69	7.9	8.8	16.7	86	2	83	5.5	9.3	14.8	98	13	78	3.2	5.9	9.2	87		
Slovenia	43	46	6.6	4.2	10.8	57	10	80	3.4	5.9	9.3	90	25	68	3.7	3.8	7.5	75		
Spain	32	48	9.5	10.8	20.3	68	8	65	18.7	7.7	26.3	92	19	64	9.5	6.8	16.3	81		
Sw eden	44	47	c	c	c	56	15	77	c	c	c	85	29	67	c	c	71			
Switzerland	53	37	4.8	5.6	10.3	47	14	77	3.5	5.5	9.0	86	22	74	2.5	2.3	4.7	78		
Turkiye	21	46	10.2	23.1	33.3	79	14	59	7.2	19.6	26.8	86	18	57	11.7	13.9	25.6	82		
United Kingdom	12	75	3.0	9.2	12.2	88	9	78	2.2	10.4	12.6	91	16	79	1.7	3.0	4.7	84		
United States	9	68	d	18.2	23.1	d	91	d	x(1)	x(2)	x(3)	x(4)	x(5)	x(6)	14	76	2.4	7.1	9.4	86
OECD average	29	55	5.5	11.8	17.1	71	9	75	6.2	11.1	17.1	92	19	72	4.7	5.6	9.9	81		
Partner and/or accession countries																				
Argentina	1	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	51	40	2.4	6.6	9.0	49	
Brazil	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	23	66	5.8	5.9	11.7	77	
Bulgaria	14	64	6.4	14.9	21.2	86	6	83	2.4	9.3	11.7	94	13	76	1.9	9.9	11.8	87		
China	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Croatia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
India	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Indonesia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Peru	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Romania	8	71	10.8	10.6	21.5	92	4	74	5.0	17.7	22.6	96	7	84	4.0	5.5	9.5	93		
Saudi Arabia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	10.5	53	26.4	9.7	36.1	89	
South Africa	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
EU25 average	30	55	5.8	10.2	15.7	70	8	77	6.5	10.0	16.3	93	18	73	4.2	5.2	9.2	82		
G20 average	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	

Note: Note: NEET refers to young people who are Not in Employment, Education, or Training. The data typically refer to the second quarter of the year, which corresponds to the first three months of the calendar year in most countries. however, in some cases, it may refer to the second three months. For definitions, methodology, and further breakdowns, refer to the OECD’s Education at a Glance Database, available at: <http://stats.oecd.org>.

Source: OECD. (2023). Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>

See the Reader’s Guide and Source and Methodology sections for more details, including definitions, data symbols, and abbreviations used.

This trend reflects a significant change in the global landscape of higher education, where the movement of international students has become a strategic element of national educational policies, economic growth, and global competitiveness (Knight, 2012. Marginson, 2016). The increase in student

departures from China is particularly noteworthy. Historically focused on English-speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, Chinese students are now increasingly considering regional options that offer high-quality education, cultural familiarity, affordability, and geographic closeness (Yang, 2020. Mok *et al.*, 2021). Malaysia has emerged as one such destination due to national efforts aimed at internationalizing its higher education system and capturing a larger share of the worldwide student population (Cheng & Siew, 2022).

According to OECD data (2023), higher education is crucial in decreasing the percentage of young adults aged 25–29 who are not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET). This issue has gained urgency following the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted educational paths and labor market entry on a global scale. As a result, governments now perceive tertiary education not only as a means for individual social advancement but also as a protective measure against youth unemployment and social exclusion. In this context, the internationalization of higher education acts both as an economic initiative and a sociocultural project that fosters talent diversification, intercultural interactions, and global citizenship.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) aims to attract 250,000 international students by 2025. This ambition is underpinned by policies promoting institutional collaborations, foreign university branch campuses' establishment, an increase in English-medium programs, and simplified visa procedures (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015). Malaysia's geopolitical position and cultural diversity enhance its attractiveness particularly for Chinese students. The country's multicultural makeup comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian communities along with indigenous groups combined with shared Confucian values and Mandarin-speaking networks creates an appealing cultural environment (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015. Mok, 2020).

Chinese families' decisions to pursue overseas education stem from various sociocultural and economic factors. These include dissatisfaction with domestic

educational systems, intense competition linked to Gaokao (the national university entrance exam), and desires for international exposure that could enhance future employability (Chen & Zimitat, 2006. Wang, 2014). Malaysia presents an alternative that alleviates challenges found in Western nations such as exorbitant tuition fees or racial discrimination while still offering globally recognized qualifications (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Thusly positioning Malaysia as both an economically viable option and culturally acceptable choice for Chinese families.

In contemporary contexts, international education serves as a transnational investment in human capital. Students pursue not only academic credentials but also opportunities for intercultural learning experiences along with professional networking that contributes to their identity formation as global citizens (Brooks & Waters, 2011). For host countries like Malaysia International students are seen as economic assets who can foster innovation research development within workforce sectors. Therefore its strategy within this global educational marketplace demonstrates commitment towards both economic advancement alongside regional educational leadership.

Malaysia's increasing allure for Chinese international students illustrates broader changes occurring within global student mobility patterns. Non-Western nations have transitioned from peripheral roles into emerging centers providing culturally relevant cost-effective regionally grounded alternatives to Western educational models. Such transformations necessitate deeper sociological insights into personal experiences faced by students navigating these environments particularly regarding how adaptation processes are influenced by academic linguistic psychological alongside cultural stressors.

Despite positive developments international education continues to present complex challenges often resulting in stressful experiences for participants involved especially among Chinese international student populations who commonly confront language barriers academic pressures culture shock feelings isolation plus struggles related identity negotiation (Smith & Khawaja ,2011. Yan ,2020). While these issues have been extensively documented within Western contexts knowledge surrounding how Chinese individuals navigate such stressors specifically located outside traditional Western or Muslim-majority settings like Malaysia remains limited . Addressing these multifaceted concerns holds

significant implications relating directly back student outcomes emotional wellbeing integration aspects socially.

Consequently this conceptual review aims at synthesizing existing literature scrutinizing personal sociocultural dimensions impacting Chinese nationals participating Malaysian institutions. It focuses upon four interconnected areas: linguistic academic psychological cultural stresses while proposing frameworks aiding comprehension about adaptation influences affecting educational success levels. The impetus behind this focus arises partly due growing reliance placed upon incoming scholars achieving national goals regarding globalization amidst insufficient research dedicated towards understanding lived realities experienced Southeast Asia's diverse educational landscapes.

Current investigations pertaining exclusively towards Chinese migrants predominantly emphasize their experiences residing within Western territories where stark socio-cultural disparities prevail which renders theoretical frameworks prevalent today somewhat inadequate when examining circumstances pertinent Asia Muslim-dominated regions notably exemplified through case studies involving Malaysian universities colleges indicating need further inquiry here. Most extant analyses center around achievement metrics focusing solely English proficiency disregarding essential variables including emotional resilience processes acculturation belongingness thus constraining development effective policy measures promoting comprehensive integration pathways available those studying abroad .

The uniqueness inherent within current study lies chiefly conceptual breadth regional emphasis interdisciplinary synthesis integrated perspectives spanning psychology intercultural relations sociology crafting multidimensional models exploring complexities associated with stress experienced internationally enrolled learners Secondly directing attention toward rapidly evolving multicultural non-Western hubs like Malaysian academia actively contests dominant paradigms prevalent throughout existing scholarship Furthermore it underscores interrelated nature domains influencing adjustment providing refined insight into overlapping compound challenges encountered during transitional phases experienced by these individuals .

This review encompasses peer-reviewed articles empirical investigations policy documentation released between years spanning two thousand until twenty-four focusing exclusively upon experiences reported amongst individuals enrolled specifically at Malaysian colleges universities thereby excluding pre-tertiary participants those attending other Southeast Asian territories While financial legal matters receive mention merely concerning intersections relating psychosocial wellness primary objective revolves around constructing model conducive informing institutional strategies enhancing resilience guiding subsequent empirical explorations centered around adapting phenomena observed relating local contexts .

This study utilizes a conceptual literature review methodology to examine the personal and sociocultural stressors faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. The choice of this approach is rooted in the study's aim to critically synthesize and evaluate existing knowledge rather than gather new empirical data. A conceptual review facilitates the generation of theoretical insights, mapping of research landscapes, and identification of underexplored areas within current scholarship. In the field of international education studies where student experiences are influenced by complex intersections of culture, language, and institutional policies this methodology supports a comprehensive understanding of how adaptation processes are theorized and experienced. It aligns with the goals of this study, which emphasize theoretical depth, social relevance, and global applicability in educational research.

The literature selection process incorporated systematic and purposive sampling strategies to ensure both scholarly rigor and thematic relevance. Major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were searched using keyword combinations like "Chinese international students," "Malaysian higher education," "acculturative stress," "language barriers," "cross-cultural adaptation," and "student mobility." Inclusion criteria were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports published from 2000 to 2024 to maintain historical depth alongside contemporary relevance. Studies focusing on international student adjustment within Southeast Asia were prioritized for their contributions to understanding psychological stressors, academic integration, and institutional responses.

Excluded were non-peer-reviewed materials, studies concerning outbound Malaysian students, and anecdotal reports. The final corpus consisted of over 80 scholarly sources that were thematically coded and critically synthesized.

The analysis was guided by several interconnected theoretical frameworks. Central is Berry's (2005) Acculturation Theory, which views intercultural adaptation as a bi-dimensional process involving cultural maintenance alongside engagement with the host society. The concept of acculturative stress (Sam & Berry, 2006) was also utilized to assess the psychological strain related to cultural adjustment. Complementary frameworks included Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Model and Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Integration both providing insight into institutional impacts on student engagement and retention. Additionally, the Push–Pull Theory (Maringe & Carter, 2007) offered a macro-level perspective on student mobility while situating Malaysia's appeal as an educational destination within global trends.

To synthesize findings across this varied body of literature, thematic analysis was conducted through both inductive and deductive coding utilizing NVivo 14 software. Four main themes emerged:

1. Personal and psychological stressors (e.g., homesickness, identity conflict, academic anxiety).
2. Linguistic challenges related to communication in academic writing and classroom participation.
3. Cultural dissonance affecting social belonging due to differences in values, peer relationships, and teaching styles.
4. Institutional support systems encompassing mentoring services, counseling options, and cross-cultural orientation programs.

This thematic analysis facilitated comparisons across different institutional contexts while emphasizing dynamics specific to Malaysia. It also identified gaps in existing literature such as gender-specific stressors, unaddressed mental health issues, and limited intersectional analyses.

Since this study relies solely on secondary data sources, ethical approval was not required. However, all relevant academic ethical standards were upheld including methodological transparency alongside proper citation practices while respecting the intellectual integrity of reviewed works. The study acknowledges

certain limitations: excluding non-English publications may overlook valuable insights available in Mandarin or Bahasa Malaysia. conceptual reviews might not fully capture real-time lived experiences. publication bias could affect representativeness among available studies. Despite these limitations, this conceptual review provides a solid theoretical foundation for future empirical research while offering practical implications for Malaysian higher education institutions aiming to improve international student well-being along with academic success.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Chinese international students' adaptation experiences in Malaysia are multifaceted influenced by academic pressures as well as psychological strains stemming from financial issues along with sociocultural factors. Utilizing Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory alongside Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory yielded six core themes: academic pressure. integration into academia. social adjustment. psychological wellness. financial strain. social isolation.

These results highlight that adaptation is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by institutional practices coupled with broader sociopolitical contexts. Discrepancies between pedagogical expectations combined with limited English skills contribute significantly toward emotional distress along with cognitive burden faced by students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who strive to balance educational obligations against economic survival.

Integrating Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan), Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow), along with Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner) enables a comprehensive understanding regarding how students form their academic identities within multicultural environments enhancing perceptions toward successful adaptation requiring more than mere language acquisition or cultural acclimatization—it necessitates transformation concerning self-concept alongside agency development coupled with enhanced intercultural competence.

Crucially important is shifting focus away from individual deficits towards systemic pedagogical influences underscoring that student-related stresses often arise due largely due structural inequities present within institutions themselves calling attention towards culturally responsive teaching methodologies improved mental health resources inclusive campus settings fostering meaningful intercultural interactions thereby allowing Malaysian universities positioning themselves competitively on a global scale grounded firmly upon culturally aware educational frameworks supporting holistic growth amongst their international student populations.

3.1 Academic pressure

Academic pressure plays a crucial role in the acculturation process for Chinese international students in Malaysia, profoundly affecting their mental health, academic performance, and assimilation into local institutions. Many of these students arrive with elevated academic expectations rooted in Confucian principles, which view educational success as both a moral duty and a demonstration of filial piety (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006. Liu, 2011). These values often manifest as internalized anxiety about performance, particularly when they encounter educational norms and evaluation methods that starkly contrast with those prevalent in China.

Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Integration posits that academic persistence hinges on students' effective engagement within the institution's academic and social frameworks. However, numerous Chinese students experience cultural dissonance at Malaysian universities that implement Western-style curricula focused on self-directed learning, critical thinking, and open discussion—approaches that are less common in China's examination-oriented education system (Heng, 2019. Teoh & Nor, 2022). This cognitive dissonance can hinder engagement and obstruct complete integration into the institution.

These challenges extend beyond individual shortcomings and highlight broader structural disparities related to cultural capital as theorized by Bourdieu (1986). Students from various educational backgrounds possess unique linguistic and symbolic assets that may be undervalued within Malaysian universities.

Consequently, their prior accomplishments or learning techniques often go unrecognized, resulting in feelings of marginalization and self-doubt (Ching, Yong, & Chia, 2021. Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

On a psychological level, these students frequently grapple with imposter syndrome, fear of failure, and reduced self-efficacy. Research by Lin and Scherz (2014) indicates a strong correlation between difficulties in academic adjustment and emotional distress coupled with decreased motivation. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory further underscores this issue: without sufficient scaffolding and culturally attuned instructional methods, learners struggle to reach their "zone of proximal development." This limitation affects not only their academic growth but also their confidence and social connections.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these difficulties. As noted by Li and Lalani (2020), the sudden transition to online learning disrupted student engagement while intensifying language barriers and technological challenges leading to experiences of academic burnout and isolation (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

To tackle these concerns effectively, universities must implement interventions informed by theory that extend beyond conventional orientation programs. By leveraging Tinto's model along with Gay's culturally sustaining pedagogy (2010), institutions should incorporate peer mentoring initiatives, multilingual academic support systems, and formative feedback strategies that promote belongingness as well as intercultural competence (Tran & Pham, 2016). Thus, academic pressure emerges not merely as an individual challenge but rather as a systemic concern intertwined with institutional culture, symbolic capital dynamics, and sociocultural expectations. Addressing this through inclusive educational reforms can assist Chinese students in achieving academic success while maintaining their cultural identity and mental well-being (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2016. Andrade, 2006).

3.2 Financial challenges

Financial strain is one of the most significant obstacles impacting the academic performance, mental health outcomes, and social integration of international students. While studying abroad is often viewed as a means to attain

upward mobility ,the realities surrounding tuition costs ,visa fees ,and everyday living expenses frequently result in persistent financial stressors (Andrade ,2006 .Russell ,Rosenthal ,& Thomson ,2010). For those coming from low- or middle-income families ,factors such as currency fluctuations ,banking limitations ,and unforeseen institutional charges heighten vulnerability even further (Beine ,De Groot ,& Van der Klaauw ,2005 .Li & Bray ,2007).

In Malaysia specifically, the situation is particularly nuanced. Though tuition fees may appear reasonable compared to Western countries, many international students especially those from China, Bangladesh, and Indonesia confront greater economic insecurities due to fluctuating currencies coupled with limited opportunities for part-time work (Rahman & Zainal ,2020. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia ,2021). These limitations increase risks related to food insecurity, housing instability, and digital exclusion all factors detrimental to learning outcomes (Koo *et al.*,2021).

The psychological consequences of financial hardship are significant. they encompass anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Smith & Khawaja, 2011. Zhang & Goodson ,2011). Within many Asian cultures, familial expectations magnify this stress since failing to fulfill financial or educational responsibilities can lead to feelings of guilt or shame (Yan & Berliner, 2011, Nguyen & Balakrishnan ,2020).

Theoretical frameworks shed light on these dynamics. Maslow's hierarchy emphasizes that unfulfilled basic needs inhibit cognitive focus while Bourdieu's notion of economic capital illustrates how scarcity restricts access to cultural resources (Schneider *et al.*,1999). Freire (1970) urges educators to confront structural inequities instead of viewing financial struggles solely as personal failures. Meanwhile Marginson (2012) critiques neoliberal models within higher education that commodify international scholars.

As such, institutional responses must transcend superficial financial aid solutions. Sustainable approaches should include emergency funding options, cost transparency, funding flexibility, and partnerships providing paid internships (Sawir *et al.*,2008, Glass *et al.*,2015). In Malaysia, it would be beneficial for institutions to offer context-sensitive financial counseling tailored towards Global South students aimed at alleviating insecurity. Ultimately, the issue surrounding

financial strain transcends mere economics it serves as an overarching determinant influencing equity, belongingness and resilience within global education systems.

3.3 Social adjustment

For many international scholars, a successful academic journey represents an avenue toward career progression, social mobility, and familial pride (Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, 2006). Nonetheless, this pursuit is often accompanied by substantial emotional burdens as they navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes alongside new pedagogical environments. Abel (2002) highlights how time management skills paired with perseverance play critical roles in achieving success, yet the expectation for independent adaptation can exacerbate stress especially among individuals raised under structured teacher-led education systems.

Malaysia's transition towards student-centered teaching methodologies emphasizing engagement, collaboration and inquiry can be disorienting for learners accustomed to high power-distance cultures where questioning authority figures might be deemed disrespectful (Biggs, 1996; Wong, 2004). Consequently, this dynamic often results in silence, lack of participation, false modesty concerning one's contributions or diminished classroom involvement (Tan & Liu, 2020).

From a theoretical lens, Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988) illustrates how cognitive overload occurs when learners attempt simultaneously assimilate novel information alongside unfamiliar instructional techniques without adequate support. Zimmerman's Self-Regulated Learning Theory (2002) further asserts that lacking metacognitive capabilities leaves them vulnerable regarding autonomy leading ultimately towards heightened anxiety levels coupled with potential burnout.

Moreover, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory along Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasize how environmental factors shape adaptation processes where effective scaffolding through culturally responsive teaching practices along peer collaboration mechanisms is fundamental for promoting both scholarly achievement along social integration (Sawir *et al.*, 2008). In its absence,

many pupils face risks associated marginalized academics along emotional alienation.

Thus, the hurdles involved socially adjusting stem primarily from institutional structures rather than solely being attributed individual deficiencies. In addressing such issues, Malaysian higher education institutions ought embrace holistic pedagogies sensitive towards diverse cultures while equipping faculty members cross-cultural communication skills strengthening mentorship schemes bridging gaps fostering sense community amongst peers(Andrade , 2006 ; Marginson&Sawir, 2011).By adopting inclusive practices like these, institutions have capacity transform what could otherwise isolating hardships into collaborative empowering experiences enriching both domestic/international cohorts alike .

3.4 Psychological well-being

Psychological distress among international students is widely documented as a multifaceted phenomenon that affects academic performance, emotional health, and sociocultural adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011. Sawir *et al.*, 2008). For Chinese international students in Malaysia, such distress is often linked to language barriers, unfamiliar academic structures, financial strain, and the emotional toll of cultural dislocation (Chen, 2011. Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). However, framing psychological distress merely as an issue of personal maladjustment obscures the structural and institutional dimensions of exclusion. In line with Discovery Education's principles of inclusivity and transformative pedagogy, it is critical to reconceptualize psychological distress not as an individual deficit but as a consequence of systemic inequities and cultural mismatches in higher education environments.

Chinese students often come from educational cultures that emphasize teacher authority, rote memorization, and high-stakes examinations (Biggs, 1996. Wang, 2014). Upon entering Malaysian institutions which increasingly promote student-centered, autonomous learning students face the challenge of transitioning without structured pedagogical support (Gu & Maley, 2008. Chen, 2016). This dissonance frequently results in cognitive overload, emotional confusion, and decreased academic confidence. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory suggests that learning and psychological

development are embedded within cultural contexts, and without proper scaffolding such as peer mentorship, culturally aware teaching, and supportive language policies, international students are left vulnerable to psychological strain. Moreover, Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory indicates that disorienting dilemmas, when unaccompanied by reflective support, can lead not to growth but to distress and academic disengagement (Cranton, 2016. Taylor, 2008). For Chinese students navigating conflicting epistemologies between Confucian pedagogies and Western constructivist approaches this conflict can manifest as anxiety, self-doubt, and alienation.

The English-dominant academic environment further compounds the issue. As Marginson (2014) and Heng (2017) argue, linguistic hegemony marginalizes non-native speakers by equating language proficiency with intelligence and academic legitimacy. Many students withdraw from class discussions, avoid help-seeking behavior, and underperform not due to intellectual deficits but because their linguistic capital is undervalued (Andrade, 2006). Translanguaging pedagogies and culturally sustaining literacy practices (García & Wei, 2014) could offer more inclusive pathways for participation, yet such strategies remain underutilized in Malaysian higher education. Financial stress is another major contributor to psychological distress. Beine, de Groot, and van der Klaauw (2005) note that the cumulative burden of tuition fees, living expenses, and visa restrictions can lead to financial precarity, which is closely linked to poor mental health outcomes (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). For Chinese students, this is exacerbated by familial expectations and the symbolic value placed on academic success abroad (Yang, 2007), creating a potent intersection of economic and emotional stressors.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory highlights how students' psychological outcomes are shaped by interconnected systems from the immediate context of classrooms to broader institutional and policy frameworks. The dissonance experienced by Chinese international students operates across these levels, generating not only emotional strain but structural disempowerment. Consequently, institutions have both an ethical and pedagogical obligation to redesign these systems to foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive learning environments. To enact such change, Freire's (1970) dialogical education model calls for institutions to treat students not as problems to be fixed but as co-constructors of knowledge. This requires participatory curriculum design, culturally inclusive assessment, and pedagogical practices that affirm students' prior knowledge and learning strategies (Gay, 2010. Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) reinforces this by underscoring the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for psychological well-being. When international students are isolated or devalued, these needs are undermined, increasing distress. Conversely, environments that support identity affirmation and authentic relationships promote resilience and academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000. Komarraju *et al.*, 2010). In conclusion, psychological distress among Chinese international students in Malaysia must be understood not merely as an individual mental health issue but as a symptom of deeper structural misalignments. Addressing this requires a shift from reactive psychological services to proactive, systemic transformation rooted in equity, cultural responsiveness, and educational justice as advocated by Discovery Education.

3.5 Financial Pressure

Financial strain is one of the most enduring and challenging obstacles encountered by international students, influencing their academic achievement, mental health, and social integration. While international education is frequently depicted as a means to achieve upward mobility and global skills, the financial responsibilities involved including tuition fees, visa costs, housing expenses, and everyday living costs can lead to persistent stress and vulnerability (Andrade, 2006. Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) highlight economic factors as a significant influence on students' choice of study destination. however, many underestimate the ongoing financial challenges associated with studying abroad. This burden is particularly acute for students from low- and middle-income nations who must also navigate issues like currency fluctuations, banking limitations, and hidden administrative fees (Beine, De Groot, & Van der Klaauw, 2005. Li & Bray, 2007).

In Malaysia specifically, while tuition rates are relatively affordable compared to those in the Global North, international students particularly from China, Bangladesh, and Indonesia often face difficulties in maintaining their financial stability (Rahman & Zainal, 2020). The depreciation of currency in their home countries can significantly diminish the actual value of remittances they receive, exacerbating their financial difficulties (OECD, 2023). Additionally, visa policies restrict legal employment opportunities by permitting part-time work only under stringent conditions that require

immigration approval (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2021). As Koo *et al.* (2021) note, many students who cannot legally enhance their income experience food insecurity and unstable housing situations along with digital exclusion all factors that hinder their educational engagement and emotional well-being.

The implications of financial insecurity extend beyond material concerns. they profoundly affect mental health and academic performance. Research by Smith and Khawaja (2011) as well as Zhang and Goodson (2011) indicates that financially stressed students are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety disorders, and social isolation especially when combined with cultural or language barriers. These impacts are often more pronounced among Asian students who may feel familial pressure to succeed academically or financially and experience guilt or shame when they fall short of these expectations (Yan & Berliner, 2011. Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). This situation can lead to cycles of disengagement and burnout.

Educational theory emphasizes the multifaceted consequences of financial stress. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) highlights that fulfilling basic physiological needs such as food security and safe housing is essential before aspiring toward higher-level goals. If these foundational needs remain unmet, students struggle to concentrate or make academic progress (Tinto, 1993). Similarly, Bourdieu's notion of economic capital (1986) illustrates how financial resources influence access to cultural capital, social connections, and symbolic recognition all crucial for academic success. Those lacking adequate financial resources may find themselves excluded from extracurricular activities, digital tools, or essential academic materials, further intensifying their marginalization.

Critical education theorists provide a structural analysis of these issues. Freire (1970) advocates for moving past deficit models that individualize financial challenges, urging institutions to address systemic inequalities that perpetuate exclusion. Marginson (2012) likewise criticizes neoliberal educational frameworks that prioritize profit over student welfare, often viewing international learners primarily as sources of revenue. To genuinely embrace "student-centered learning," it is imperative that financial accessibility becomes an integral part of inclusive educational practices (Ryan & Viète, 2009). Universities have an opportunity to respond effectively by increasing emergency funding, supporting work-study programs, enforcing clearer fee structures, and incorporating financial literacy into student services (Sawir *et al.*, 2008. Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015). In Malaysia, specific initiatives aimed at assisting students from the Global South,

making payment plans more flexible, and partnering with employers for part-time jobs or internships could alleviate some aspects of financial instability. Additionally, culturally aware financial counseling should be integrated into services to normalize discussions surrounding economic challenges and facilitate timely intervention. In conclusion, the issue of financial pressure transcends mere economic considerations. It represents a complex challenge impacting resilience, belonging, and equity within international higher education. Addressing this matter necessitates structural changes rooted in educational principles and social justice efforts, ensuring that access to finances is recognized as a fundamental requirement for both academic success and genuine inclusion.

3.6 Experiences of social isolation and loneliness

International students frequently encounter the compounded challenges of academic expectations and social isolation, both of which can significantly impact their mental well-being. Building new relationships in unfamiliar settings is often difficult due to various cultural, linguistic, and emotional obstacles. Yang and Clum (1994) observe that the lack of familial and community support contributes to feelings of social loneliness, while Searle and Ward (1990) emphasize the strong link between limited access to support systems and increased distress levels. For Chinese students specifically, homesickness is particularly intense because close family connections are vital in collectivist cultures. The Stress and Coping Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) illustrates how insufficient support diminishes students' ability to cope, frequently leading to burnout or depression. Additionally, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) highlights how misunderstandings regarding local customs or subtle forms of exclusion can erode self-esteem, making students feel marginalized. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) further note that differences in communication styles and values can impede the formation of friendships, resulting in withdrawal and isolation. Digital communities have emerged as a coping mechanism, providing virtual environments for connection and emotional assistance.

Homesickness stands out as one of the most significant hurdles facing international students. It not only disrupts adaptation but also affects academic achievement. According to a survey by the Association of International Students (2022), 72% of international students report experiencing homesickness during their first

semester. This issue is far from insignificant. It has been associated with anxiety, sleep issues, and diminished focus (Hamaideh, 2011). Homesickness can lower motivation levels, hinder relationship-building efforts, and create feelings of disorientation (Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015). For Chinese students studying in Malaysia, restricted opportunities for family contact due to travel costs, visa limitations, and time zone differences exacerbate feelings of distress (Mori, 2000). Additionally, comparing home culture with that of the host country may amplify feelings of loss and contribute to the cognitive dissonance described in Berry's (1997) Acculturation Model.

Discrimination further exacerbates these challenges. International students commonly face stereotyping, microaggressions, and social exclusion (Constantine *et al.*, 2006). Even minor slights such as comments about language proficiency or mispronunciations can accumulate over time to create an environment lacking psychological safety (Sue *et al.*, 2007. Lee & Rice, 2007). Such experiences are especially pronounced within Eurocentric academic settings where students' cultural knowledge may be disregarded or devalued contributing to disengagement from their studies (Guo & Guo, 2017). These difficulties highlight the necessity for universities to enhance their support frameworks beyond standard approaches. Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010) alongside Discovery Education's inclusive practice framework could provide effective solutions moving forward. Initiatives such as peer mentorship programs, multilingual counseling services, anti-discrimination training sessions, and culturally responsive teaching methods can help affirm student identities while alleviating psychological stress. In conclusion, homesickness and discrimination represent interconnected stressors that hinder successful adaptation and academic participation among international students. Tackling these issues requires systemic changes that normalize discussions around emotional struggles, prioritize mental health considerations, and reconceptualize international education as a process emphasizing mutual transformation rather than mere assimilation.

4 CONCLUSION

This study has examined the multifaceted adaptation experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysia, with a specific focus on the interplay between language barriers, economic constraints, academic pressures, and psychological

challenges. These stressors are deeply interrelated and form a complex ecosystem that significantly affects students' educational trajectories and overall well-being. The findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic, intersectional approach that moves beyond isolated interventions and toward comprehensive support mechanisms for international students. Language proficiency emerged as a foundational determinant of both academic success and social integration. In the Malaysian context, where English serves as the dominant medium of instruction in higher education, limited language skills hinder students' ability to comprehend course content, engage in classroom discourse, and form meaningful relationships with peers and lecturers (Kuo, 2011. Littlemore, Chen, Koester, & Bartram, 2011). To mitigate this, higher education institutions should implement pre-departure language bridging programs, facilitate on-campus language exchange initiatives, and integrate digital tools such as language learning applications and online communication platforms (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2016). These interventions can serve as both academic scaffolds and social enablers, fostering confidence and participation.

Equally pressing are the financial burdens faced by international students, which exacerbate psychological stress and limit access to resources. High tuition fees, living expenses, and restrictions on employment for student visa holders create systemic vulnerabilities (Beine, De Groot, & van der Klaauw, 2005. Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Institutional responses must go beyond ad hoc scholarships. Sustainable solutions include expanding needs-based financial aid, enabling part-time on-campus work, and delivering financial literacy workshops to equip students with budgeting and planning skills (Al-Mosaind, 2014. Vortisch, 2024). These measures can directly contribute to students' economic resilience and reduce anxiety stemming from financial insecurity. Academic pressure, often rooted in unfamiliar pedagogical norms and expectations, also emerged as a source of adjustment difficulty. Cultural differences in educational values, such as emphasis on critical thinking, independent learning, and active classroom participation, may challenge incoming students accustomed to different learning traditions (Wong, 2004). Institutions can support academic integration by offering writing-intensive courses, academic orientation seminars, and culturally sensitive mentoring programs. Building inclusive peer learning communities can also help bridge cultural gaps and normalize diverse academic identities (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Perhaps most critical is the dimension of psychological well-being, as many students grapple with culture shock, loneliness, and a sense of dislocation from their home communities. Drawing on Ward, Bochner, and Furnham's (2001) Acculturation Model, this study highlights the need for institutions to view adaptation not just as individual effort but as a reciprocal process shaped by the host society's receptiveness. Mental health services that are linguistically and culturally attuned to international students' needs, along with peer-led support groups, can significantly reduce emotional strain and promote belonging (Chen, 2016. Chirkov, Safdar, & Arndt, 2007). Moreover, Malaysia's multicultural environment offers unique potential for intercultural exchange. fostering this through inclusive campus events and intercultural dialogue can help reduce ethnocentric biases and enhance social cohesion.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Authors' Contribution

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Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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