

**Factors Influencing Chinese Students' Academic
Achievements in the UK: English Language Proficiency
and Cultural Integration**

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Abstract

The increasing internationalization of higher education, alongside China's rapid socio-economic development, has resulted in a substantial growth in the number of Chinese students pursuing tertiary education in the United Kingdom. Despite this trend, many encounter considerable academic and psychological challenges as they navigate a new cultural and educational environment. This study investigates the influence of English language proficiency and cultural integration on the academic achievements of Chinese students in the UK. Employing a quantitatively driven mixed-methods design, data were collected from 39 questionnaire responses and six semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire incorporated validated measures of academic self-efficacy, academic stress, personality, and flourishing. Findings indicate that English language proficiency, academic support, and stress management significantly affect students' academic self-efficacy, while cultural integration—particularly through interactions with host nationals—mitigates social and academic difficulties. Moreover, results demonstrate a positive correlation between language proficiency and cultural adjustment over time. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between linguistic competence, cultural adaptation, and academic performance, offering practical implications for higher education institutions in supporting the academic and personal development of international students.

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The globalisation of higher education has led to a significant increase in international student mobility, with the United Kingdom (UK) being one of the top destinations for students worldwide. Among these, Chinese international students represent the largest international student group in the UK, with over 150,000 enrolled in UK higher education institutions in recent years (UK Council for International Student Affairs [UKCISA], 2023). These students often pursue international education to gain global exposure, improve career prospects, and experience cultural diversity. However, despite the high enrollment numbers, many Chinese students face substantial academic and socio-cultural challenges that influence their academic success and overall experience.

The academic achievements of Chinese students in the UK are influenced by various interconnected factors. Prominent among these are English language proficiency and cultural integration. Language barriers, unfamiliar academic conventions, and intercultural miscommunication can significantly impede learning and academic performance (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Additionally, the transition from Chinese to British educational contexts involves navigating cultural norms, classroom expectations, and social values that may differ considerably from those experienced in China (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010).

International students often experience a “culture shock” (Oberg, 1960), which affects their psychological and academic adjustment. For Chinese students, cultural integration

is not merely a social exercise but a critical factor in developing a sense of belonging and achieving educational goals. The lack of integration often results in isolation, limited social interaction with local students, and a failure to develop intercultural competencies that are increasingly essential in academic environments (Wang, 2017). Conversely, successful adaptation facilitates not only academic progress but also personal development and well-being.

Despite extensive literature on international student experiences, there remains a need to understand the nuanced ways in which Chinese students negotiate the UK educational system. This research investigates how **English language proficiency** and **intercultural adaptation** shape Chinese students' academic experiences and outcomes, focusing on both challenges and coping strategies.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While UK universities offer rich academic resources and a multicultural learning environment, Chinese students often face barriers that hinder their academic potential. The literature points to a disconnect between Chinese students' expectations and the realities of UK higher education (Wang & Shan, 2021). Many students struggle with academic English, especially in terms of writing, critical thinking, and oral communication in seminars (Andrade, 2006). These linguistic challenges are often compounded by unfamiliar teaching styles, such as student-centred learning and open classroom discussions, which differ from the didactic methods prevalent in Chinese institutions.

Moreover, cultural adaptation remains a complex and dynamic process. Cultural integration involves more than language proficiency—it entails adapting to new norms, values, communication styles, and academic ethics. Research shows that poor integration can lead to emotional stress, academic disengagement, and social withdrawal (Leong, 2015). These factors, in turn, adversely affect students' academic performance and overall satisfaction with their educational experience.

Given the rising number of Chinese students in the UK and the critical role they play in the internationalisation of higher education, there is an urgent need to identify specific challenges they face and the strategies they adopt to succeed. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the interplay between language proficiency and cultural integration, and how these dimensions influence academic achievement.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to explore how English language proficiency and cultural integration affect the academic achievements of Chinese international students in the UK. To accomplish this, the study will pursue the following objectives:

- To identify the key academic, social, and cultural challenges encountered by Chinese students.
- To explore the coping strategies Chinese students employ to overcome these challenges.

- To examine the impact of intercultural adaptation on academic performance, identity, and social relationships.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the above aims and objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the primary academic, social, and cultural challenges encountered by Chinese international students within the UK higher education system?

RQ2: What adaptive strategies do Chinese international students employ to navigate and overcome academic challenges in UK universities?

RQ3: How does the process of intercultural adaptation in the UK shape social, cultural, and academic transformations among Chinese international students?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the growing body of research on international student adaptation by focusing specifically on Chinese students—a group that constitutes a major demographic in UK universities.

Understanding their experiences will help educators and policymakers develop more inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Secondly, the study's findings will inform language support programmes and intercultural training initiatives. By identifying how language barriers and cultural differences influence

learning, universities can design interventions that enhance student engagement and performance (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Additionally, the research will offer practical recommendations to students, helping them better prepare for and adapt to life and study in the UK.

Finally, the research provides a framework for examining academic transformation through an intercultural lens. The focus on personal, academic, and social development offers a holistic view of student success that goes beyond academic grades to include personal growth and cultural competence.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organised into five chapters. Following this introduction:

- **Chapter Two** reviews the relevant literature, focusing on theories of intercultural adaptation, English language learning, and international student experiences.
- **Chapter Three** outlines the research methodology, including research design, sampling, data collection methods, and ethical considerations.
- **Chapter Four** presents the findings and analysis, drawing on data from semi-structured interviews and thematic coding.
- **Chapter Five** discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, highlighting implications and offering recommendations for future practice and research.

- **Chapter Six** Conclusion and give recommendations on relevant research questions.

1.7 Summary

In summary, this introductory chapter has established the importance of investigating the academic and cultural experiences of Chinese students in the UK. The challenges posed by limited English proficiency and cultural adjustment are significant barriers to academic success. This research seeks to illuminate these issues through a qualitative exploration of Chinese students' lived experiences, contributing to both scholarly knowledge and practical outcomes in the field of international education.

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines relevant literature related to the academic experiences of Chinese international students in UK higher education. It focuses on three core themes aligned with the research questions: (1) **intercultural adaptation theories**, (2) **English language learning and proficiency**, and (3) **international student experiences**, with a specific focus on Chinese students. The review aims to establish the theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding the academic, social, and cultural challenges

faced by Chinese students, their coping strategies, and the impact of cultural integration on their academic transformation.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Intercultural Adaptation

2.2.1 Culture Shock and Acculturation Theory

One of the earliest and most widely cited models of intercultural adaptation is **Oberg's (1960)** concept of "culture shock," which outlines the psychological disorientation that occurs when individuals move to a new cultural environment. The model identifies four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. Chinese students in the UK often move through these stages, initially experiencing excitement, followed by confusion and frustration due to language barriers, unfamiliar academic expectations, and social isolation (Zhou et al., 2008).

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework further expands on cultural adaptation by proposing four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation.

Among Chinese students, integration (maintaining cultural identity while engaging with the host culture) tends to lead to more positive academic and psychological outcomes (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). However, some students adopt separation or marginalisation, often due to language limitations or perceived cultural distance, which can hinder academic success and well-being.

2.2.2 Intercultural Competence and Identity

Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) outlines a progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages of cultural understanding. Chinese students who reach the ethnorelative stages are better equipped to interpret academic expectations and social cues within the UK educational context. Similarly, **Kim's (2001)** integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation emphasises the dynamic and continuous nature of adaptation, shaped by personal and environmental factors.

Cultural identity also plays a vital role in the adaptation process. Research by **Phinney (1990)** suggests that bicultural identity can enhance resilience and academic persistence among international students. For Chinese students, maintaining a strong cultural identity while being open to UK cultural practices appears to facilitate smoother academic transitions (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010).

2.3 English Language Proficiency and Academic Performance

2.3.1 Language as a Barrier to Learning

English language proficiency is frequently cited as a fundamental determinant of academic success among international students (Andrade, 2006; Wang & Shan, 2021). For Chinese students, common difficulties include limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, challenges in understanding lectures, and anxiety about speaking in public (Liu, 2013). These challenges can lead to lower levels of classroom participation, reduced confidence, and difficulty in completing written assessments.

Academic writing, in particular, poses significant challenges. Chinese students often report difficulties in expressing critical arguments and understanding plagiarism rules, which differ markedly from Chinese academic conventions (Li & Wegerif, 2014). The pressure to achieve high academic standards while navigating a foreign language can contribute to stress and academic underperformance (Chen, 2019).

2.3.2 Language Development and Support

Despite these challenges, Chinese students employ a variety of strategies to improve their language skills. These include enrolling in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, using language-learning apps, and forming study groups (Evans & Morrison, 2011). However, research suggests that institutional language support services are often underutilised or not tailored to the specific needs of Chinese students (Jiang & Carpenter, 2014). Some students are reluctant to seek help due to fear of losing face or being perceived as incompetent.

In this context, peer support and informal learning networks play an important role.

According to **Wright and Schartner (2013)**, students who engage with diverse peer groups tend to improve their language proficiency more rapidly. Thus, language learning is not solely an academic task but a social process influenced by opportunities for interaction.

2.4 Chinese Students' Academic, Social, and Cultural Challenges in the UK

Chinese students represent the largest group of international students in UK higher education, contributing significantly to the internationalisation of universities and the UK economy (UKCISA, 2023). Their experiences have been extensively studied, with particular attention to English language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and academic integration (Wu, Garza and Guzman, 2015). This review explores the challenges and adaptive strategies of Chinese students in the UK context.

2.4.1 English Language Proficiency

English proficiency is a central factor influencing Chinese students' academic success abroad. Limited academic English skills can create barriers in areas such as essay writing, critical thinking, and oral participation (Andrade, 2006). Chinese students often report difficulty with discipline-specific vocabulary and academic writing conventions (Hyland, 2013). According to Liu (2016), English language challenges not only affect academic outcomes but also restrict social integration, leading to isolation. Universities have attempted to address this by offering pre-sessional language programmes, but research suggests that continued in-course support is essential (Evans and Morrison, 2011).

2.4.2 Academic Adjustment

Chinese students often experience difficulty adjusting to the UK's educational norms, such as independent learning, critical thinking, and open discussions (Ryan & Louie, 2007). These expectations contrast with the teacher-centred approach in China, where

memorisation and respect for authority are prioritised. As a result, many students find it challenging to actively engage in class discussions or to question lecturers, which are key aspects of academic success in the UK.

Additionally, differences in assessment formats, such as essay-based exams and group presentations, can cause stress and confusion (Robertson et al., 2000). Chinese students may initially underperform not because of lack of knowledge, but due to unfamiliarity with the expectations of assessment practices.

2.4.3 Social Isolation and Cultural Distance

Social integration is another significant challenge. Research shows that many Chinese students form social networks primarily with other Chinese peers (Montgomery, 2010), limiting their exposure to English-speaking environments and British culture. This tendency may be reinforced by cultural differences, language anxiety, and perceived discrimination or exclusion from local students (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

Intercultural adaptation is another significant issue. Many Chinese students report difficulties establishing friendships with local peers, often forming social circles primarily with other Chinese students (Brown and Holloway, 2008). This can limit opportunities for intercultural exchange, which is vital for both language development and cultural learning (Yao, 2014). However, research also highlights that Chinese students develop coping strategies, such as seeking support from co-nationals, online communities, and international student services (Wu, Garza and Guzman, 2015).

Cultural differences in learning and teaching styles create further challenges. In China, education tends to emphasise teacher authority, memorisation, and examination performance, whereas UK higher education promotes critical analysis, independent learning, and open debate (Jin and Cortazzi, 2017). As a result, Chinese students may experience "culture shock" in classroom participation and assessment expectations (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). Montgomery and McDowell (2009) note that adapting to the UK's interactive learning environment can be both a challenge and a transformative opportunity for personal growth.

The concept of "face" (mianzi) and communication style differences, such as indirectness and modesty, can further inhibit interaction (Gao, 2006). These factors contribute to social isolation, which in turn affects emotional well-being and academic motivation.

2.4.4 Cultural Transition and Mental Health

The cultural transition process can also impact mental health. Several studies highlight high levels of stress, loneliness, and anxiety among Chinese students, especially in their first year of study (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Without adequate support, such mental health issues can escalate and impact academic performance. Unfortunately, many Chinese students underutilise counselling services due to cultural stigma surrounding mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

2.5 Adaptive Strategies of Chinese Students in the UK

2.5.1 Academic Coping Strategies

Chinese students employ a variety of adaptive strategies to meet academic expectations.

These include increasing study time, using past exam papers, joining study groups, and seeking support from Chinese alumni (Wu, 2015). Some students develop new learning habits such as critical reading and self-directed learning to align with UK standards.

Moreover, resilience and a strong achievement orientation are common traits among Chinese students. Many adopt a growth mindset, viewing initial academic failure as a learning opportunity (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Others benefit from guidance provided by lecturers or academic advisors, especially when these relationships are built on trust and mutual understanding.

2.5.2 Social Adaptation Strategies

To overcome social isolation, some Chinese students actively seek intercultural friendships by joining university societies, volunteering, or living in mixed-accommodation settings (Tran, 2011). These interactions foster cultural learning and improve language fluency. However, success in this area depends on personal disposition, institutional support, and the receptiveness of domestic students.

Despite the challenges, Chinese students demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Wang and Shan (2007) argue that Chinese students employ strategies such as rote memorisation alongside emerging critical thinking skills to succeed in UK academia. Moreover, intercultural learning experiences enhance global competence and employability (Ryan and Carroll, 2005). Universities play a critical role by offering

inclusive teaching practices, intercultural workshops, and structured peer-support programmes (Huang and Turner, 2018).

In some cases, social media platforms such as WeChat provide emotional support and cultural continuity but may also reinforce separation from local cultural contexts (Heng, 2018). Thus, the use of digital technologies presents both opportunities and challenges for social adaptation.

2.5.3 Emotional and Identity Management

Emotional coping strategies, such as seeking peer support or maintaining contact with family in China, help students manage stress (Li, 2016). Some students also reframe their identity as “cultural learners,” which fosters a more positive attitude towards adaptation. The concept of “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) is useful in this regard, as it reflects the hybrid identity formed by students navigating between cultures.

2.6 Intercultural Adaptation and Academic Transformation

2.6.1 Intercultural Learning and Growth

Intercultural adaptation fosters not only language and academic skills but also cognitive and emotional development. Chinese students often undergo a process of transformation, gaining intercultural competence, increased independence, and broader worldviews (Gu & Maley, 2008). These changes contribute to long-term academic and professional benefits.

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning suggests that exposure to new perspectives prompts critical reflection, which leads to personal and intellectual growth. Chinese students who successfully adapt tend to become more critical thinkers and better communicators—skills highly valued in academic and professional contexts.

2.6.2 Institutional Role in Supporting Adaptation

The institutional context plays a crucial role in facilitating intercultural adaptation. Universities that provide culturally responsive teaching, inclusive curricula, and tailored support services are more effective in promoting student success (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Intercultural training for staff and opportunities for peer interaction are also essential in creating an environment conducive to transformation.

However, critics argue that UK universities often adopt a deficit model, viewing international students as problematic rather than recognising their potential for enriching the academic community (Leask, 2009). Shifting this narrative is essential for fostering inclusive and effective learning environments.

2.7 Previous frame work on factors influence international students studying in the UK

International students in the UK face a range of academic and social challenges that directly affect their performance. Researchers have employed several theoretical perspectives to better understand the experiences of international students in UK higher education. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, for example, highlights how

students' prior educational backgrounds, social networks, and linguistic competencies influence their ability to adapt and succeed in new academic environments. This is particularly relevant to Chinese students, who often arrive with strong discipline-based knowledge but may find themselves disadvantaged in areas such as critical thinking and academic writing, which are highly valued in UK universities (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). Similarly, Berry's (1997) acculturation theory provides a framework for analysing the ways in which students negotiate cultural differences, choosing between strategies such as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalisation. For Chinese students, acculturation is often shaped by the balance between maintaining ties with co-national peers and engaging with host cultures (Yao, 2014).

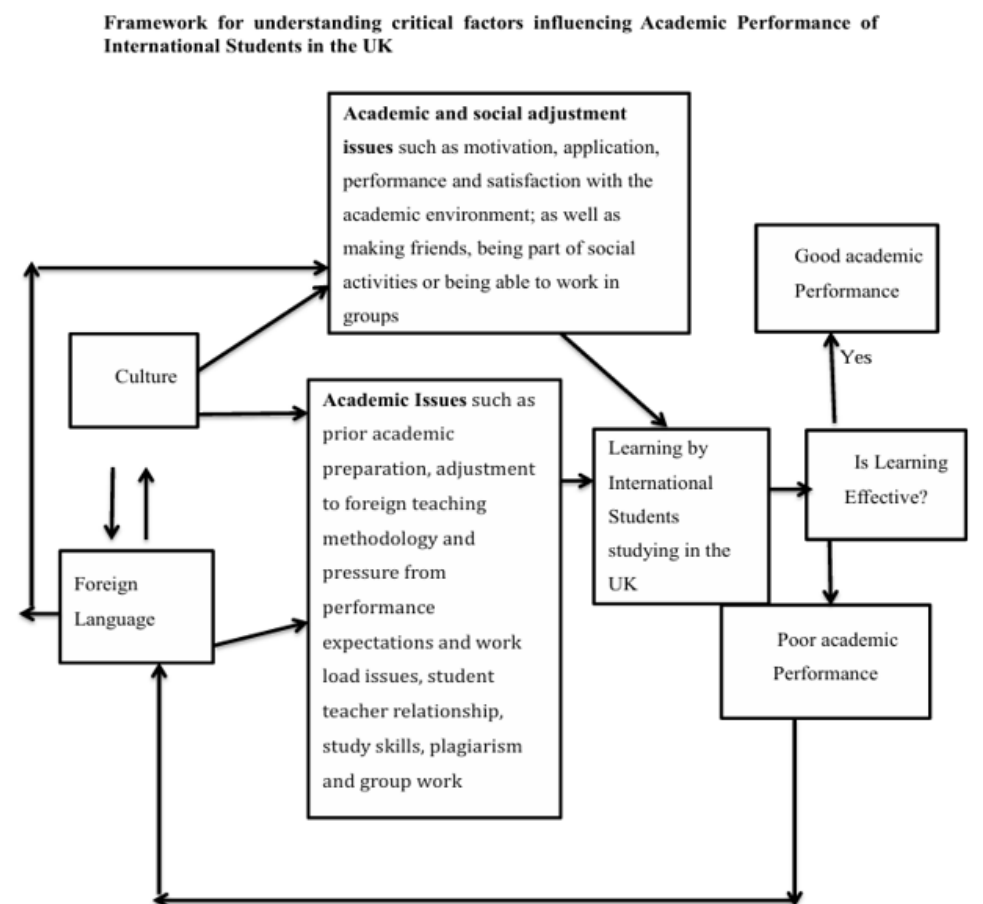


Figure 2: Critical Factors Affecting the Academic Performance of International Students in the UK

The research of Ece and Inegbedion (2015) draws further attention to the structural and institutional dimensions of student performance, particularly in the context of rising tuition fees after the 2012 reforms and increasing accountability pressures in UK higher education. It highlights **culture, foreign language, academic issues, and academic and social adjustment** as critical factors influencing the academic performance of international students. Although this framework was not tested specifically on Chinese students, it provides a useful lens to examine their experiences, given that Chinese students form the largest international student cohort in UK higher education (UKCISA, 2023). This review first discusses the framework in the context of international students more broadly, before linking each factor to existing evidence on Chinese students in the UK.

2.7.1 Culture

The framework identifies culture as a central influence on international students' learning and adjustment. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds often face challenges in adapting to new academic expectations, teaching practices, and social norms (Andrade, 2006). For many international students, cultural distance from the UK can lead to misunderstandings in classroom behaviour, reduced participation, and feelings of isolation (Brown and Holloway, 2008).

For Chinese students, these cultural challenges are particularly significant. The Chinese education system traditionally values teacher authority, exam performance, and memorisation (Jin and Cortazzi, 2017). By contrast, UK higher education stresses critical thinking, independent learning, and active participation (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). This cultural gap often results in initial difficulties in engaging with group work or seminar discussions. Therefore, while the framework's focus on culture applies to all international students, it is especially relevant to Chinese students due to the stark contrast between Chinese and UK academic traditions.

2.7.2 Foreign Language

Foreign language proficiency is another critical factor in the framework. International students often face difficulties in academic writing, oral presentations, and understanding subject-specific vocabulary (Evans and Morrison, 2011). These challenges not only hinder academic performance but also limit social interaction with peers and lecturers, reinforcing adjustment difficulties (Wu, Garza and Guzman, 2015).

Chinese students in the UK frequently report similar struggles. Liu (2016) highlights that listening comprehension in fast-paced lectures and the use of academic English present significant challenges. Hyland (2013) also notes that Chinese students find adapting to UK academic writing conventions—such as originality, referencing, and critical argumentation—particularly difficult. Moreover, limited oral proficiency reduces opportunities to make friends with home students (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009), further impacting both academic and social integration.

2.7.3. Academic Issues

The framework recognises academic issues such as prior preparation, teaching methodology, workload, and study skills as important influences on international students' academic performance. For many international students, adapting to new forms of assessment and managing expectations of independent study can be challenging (Ryan and Carroll, 2005).

Chinese students experience these issues acutely. Many struggle with group work, where interactive participation and equal contribution are expected (Jin and Cortazzi, 2017). Plagiarism is another concern, often stemming from different understandings of knowledge ownership rather than intentional misconduct (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). Heavy workloads and high expectations can further intensify stress (Wang and Shan, 2007). However, Chinese students also draw upon resilience and hybrid learning strategies, combining memorisation with gradually acquired critical thinking skills, to succeed in the UK context.

2.7.4. Academic and Social Adjustment

The framework highlights that adjustment involves both academic motivation and social participation. International students' ability to form friendships, participate in activities, and feel included in the academic environment directly influences their satisfaction and performance (Andrade, 2006). Without sufficient support, many international students experience social isolation (Brown and Holloway, 2008).

For Chinese students, social adjustment can be particularly challenging. They often form strong networks with co-national peers, which provide emotional support but limit intercultural interaction (Yao, 2014). Montgomery and McDowell (2009) found that limited contact with British students reduces opportunities to practice English and engage with local culture, impacting both social and academic growth. Universities play a vital role here, as inclusive teaching practices, intercultural workshops, and peer mentoring can improve Chinese students' adjustment (Huang and Turner, 2018).

2.7.5. Academic Performance Outcomes

According to the framework, the interplay of culture, language, academic issues, and adjustment ultimately determines international students' academic performance.

Students who adapt successfully achieve better outcomes, while those struggling across multiple dimensions risk underperformance (European Centre for Research Training and Development, 2015).

For Chinese students, success is strongly linked to overcoming these interconnected challenges. Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015) found that students who actively engage with support services, develop intercultural friendships, and improve their English proficiency perform better academically. Moreover, Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) argue that the adaptation journey can enhance Chinese students' intercultural competence and employability, showing that academic challenges often produce long-term personal and professional benefits.

Their study emphasises that student success is not solely a matter of individual ability but is also influenced by the support systems and resources available within institutions. These findings connect with the experiences of Chinese students, many of whom invest heavily in overseas education and therefore expect a strong return on their financial and personal commitment. Access to academic support, language training, and intercultural engagement opportunities can play a decisive role in shaping their satisfaction and academic outcomes (Huang and Turner, 2018).

Importantly, Ece and Inegbedion (2015) draw on Tinto's student integration model and Bean's student attrition theory, both of which emphasise the significance of academic and social integration in determining persistence and success. For Chinese students, these frameworks resonate strongly: academic integration may involve mastering new forms of assessment and classroom participation, while social integration requires building relationships with peers and engaging in campus communities (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009). When integration is successful, students are more likely to thrive academically and personally; when it is limited, challenges such as isolation, stress, or lower performance may emerge.

Together, these frameworks demonstrate that international student performance in the UK is shaped by the interplay between cultural background, institutional support, and opportunities for integration. For Chinese students in particular, the combination of cultural adaptation, language proficiency, and supportive academic environments is central to achieving positive educational outcomes.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the existing literature on the academic and cultural experiences of Chinese students in UK higher education. The review began by outlining key theories of intercultural adaptation, followed by an examination of the role of English

language proficiency in shaping academic performance. It then explored the specific academic, social, and cultural challenges faced by Chinese students and the adaptive strategies they employ. Finally, the review highlighted the transformative potential of intercultural adaptation and the institutional responsibilities in supporting this process.

The findings from this review provide a solid foundation for addressing the study's three research questions and justify the need for a deeper, qualitative exploration of Chinese students' lived experiences in the UK.

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The methodology chapter outlines the philosophical assumptions, research design, and methodological strategies employed in this study. The research investigates the factors influencing Chinese students' academic achievements in the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on the role of English language proficiency and cultural integration. The chapter is organised into two main sections: first section is research design, which covers the epistemological and ontological foundations, researcher positionality, reflexivity, and theoretical framework; and the second section is methodology, which discusses sampling, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Epistemological and Ontological Position

Philosophical assumptions shape the methodological choices of any study. This research is situated within a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology.

Ontologically, constructivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and subject to multiple interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of this study, the concept of *academic achievement* cannot be understood solely in terms of grades or measurable outputs; it is also shaped by subjective experiences of language barriers, cultural transition, and self-efficacy.

Epistemologically, interpretivism emphasises understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences (Bryman, 2016). This position is particularly relevant for exploring how Chinese international students perceive and negotiate the challenges of studying in a foreign academic environment. While the quantitative data provide measurable insights into patterns of academic self-efficacy, stress, and flourishing, the qualitative data reveal deeper interpretations of how language proficiency and cultural integration are experienced in practice. Thus, the combination of interpretivist and constructivist assumptions supports a mixed-methods design that balances generalisability with depth of understanding.

3.2.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Researcher positionality plays a critical role in shaping the research process. As an international scholar with an awareness of cross-cultural challenges, the researcher occupies both an insider and outsider position. Familiarity with Chinese cultural norms and educational practices provides a degree of insider knowledge, which can enhance rapport with participants and aid interpretation of subtle cultural nuances (Sultana, 2007).

However, this familiarity also carries the risk of imposing preconceived assumptions on participants' accounts.

Reflexivity was employed throughout the study to mitigate such risks. A reflexive journal was maintained to record personal assumptions, emerging biases, and methodological decisions during the research process (Berger, 2015). For instance, when interpreting participants' accounts of academic stress, the researcher critically reflected on whether cultural predispositions towards collectivism or family expectations influenced interpretation. Transparency in positionality enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in participants' perspectives rather than researcher assumptions.

3.2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Berry's acculturation model (1997) and Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997).

Berry's acculturation framework provides a lens to examine cultural adaptation among international students. The model identifies four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. In the context of Chinese students in the UK, integration—maintaining aspects of their home culture while engaging with the host society—can be seen as an adaptive strategy that supports both academic and personal success.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory complements this by focusing on students' beliefs in their capabilities to achieve academic success. Self-efficacy is influenced by mastery experiences, social persuasion, and psychological states, all of which are shaped by language proficiency and cultural adjustment. By combining these frameworks, this research examines how cultural and linguistic factors jointly influence academic achievement, recognising both external adaptation processes and internal psychological mechanisms.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was adopted, targeting Chinese students enrolled in UK higher education institutions. Purposive sampling was appropriate given the study's focus on a specific demographic group whose experiences directly align with the research objectives (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

The sample comprised 39 participants who completed questionnaires and six participants who participated in semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire sample allowed for a broader understanding of general trends in academic self-efficacy, stress, and flourishing, while the smaller interview sub-sample facilitated in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Although the sample size is modest, it aligns with the expectations of exploratory mixed-methods research where depth of analysis is prioritised over statistical generalisability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Recruitment was conducted through university networks, student societies, and social media groups. Eligibility criteria included being a Chinese national currently studying in a UK higher education institution at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. This ensured relevance to the study's focus on cross-cultural adaptation in academic contexts.

3.3.2 Data Collection Methods

Questionnaires

Quantitative data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire distributed both electronically and in person. The questionnaire included validated scales to measure key constructs:

- **Academic self-efficacy** (adapted from Chemers et al., 2001)
- **Academic stress levels** (using a modified version of the Perceived Stress Scale; Cohen et al., 1983)
- **Personality traits** (based on a short Big Five inventory; John & Srivastava, 1999)
- **Flourishing** (using Diener et al.'s, 2010 flourishing scale)

These measures enabled systematic examination of the relationships between language proficiency, cultural integration, and academic outcomes.

Questionnaire Design and Rationale

Based on the theories of the two frameworks mentioned above, the questionnaire used in this study was designed to capture both measurable constructs and experiential dimensions relevant to Chinese students' academic achievements in the UK. The structure of the instrument was divided into four sections, each informed by the research objectives, theoretical framework, and existing literature on international student adjustment. The rationale for this design was to ensure that the questionnaire addressed not only demographic variables but also the academic, social, and cultural factors underpinning language proficiency and cultural integration. There are four sections consists of totally 16 questions on the questionnaire.

Section A: Background Information

This section collected demographic data, including age, gender, level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate), length of stay in the UK, and self-assessed English proficiency. The inclusion of these items was essential to contextualise the findings and allow for exploration of potential differences across sub-groups. Previous research has shown that variables such as length of residence and level of study significantly shape students' adaptation processes (Andrade, 2006). Collecting this information also facilitated a clearer understanding of how individual characteristics influence academic self-efficacy and cultural integration.

Section B: Academic, Social, and Cultural Challenges

This section was designed to measure the difficulties Chinese students encounter in UK higher education, such as academic stress, communication barriers, and experiences of social isolation. The decision to include this section was grounded in studies that highlight the dual challenges faced by international students in terms of both academic performance and socio-cultural adaptation (Sawir et al., 2008). Questions in this section sought to identify the extent to which language barriers, teaching styles, and cultural differences impact academic achievement and well-being.

Section C: Adaptive Strategies

This section focused on the strategies employed by students to overcome academic and cultural challenges. Questions explored behaviours such as seeking academic support, engaging with peers, and developing coping mechanisms for stress. The rationale for including this section lies in evidence that adaptive behaviours—such as accessing support services and forming intercultural friendships—can mitigate the negative effects of stress and facilitate successful adjustment (Chirkov et al., 2007). This section aligns with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, as it sheds light on the ways students exert agency in navigating their academic environment.

Section D: Intercultural Adaptation and Growth

The final section examined the broader outcomes of students' adaptation processes, including increased intercultural competence, personal growth, and changes in academic confidence over time. The rationale for this section draws from Berry's (1997) acculturation model, which emphasises that intercultural adaptation involves both

challenges and positive developmental outcomes. By capturing students' reflections on growth and transformation, this section provided insight into how language proficiency and cultural integration contribute not only to immediate academic performance but also to long-term resilience and flourishing.

Overall, the questionnaire design reflected a holistic approach to understanding the academic and cultural experiences of Chinese students in the UK. Each section was deliberately structured to move from contextual demographic information through challenges and coping strategies, to outcomes of adaptation. This structure enabled the research to capture both the difficulties faced and the resources mobilised by students in their pursuit of academic success abroad.

Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through six semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of questionnaire respondents. Interviews explored participants' lived experiences of language challenges, cultural adjustment, academic stress, and coping strategies. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to follow up on emerging themes while ensuring consistency across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were conducted in English or Mandarin depending on participant preference, and were audio-recorded with consent.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Context and Rationale

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese students' lived experiences in the UK. While the questionnaire provided breadth and measurable data, the interviews offered an opportunity to capture the complexity of students' perspectives on academic achievement, English language proficiency, and cultural integration. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide a balance between structure and flexibility: predetermined questions ensure consistency across participants, while open-ended responses allow students to articulate their personal experiences in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The interview schedule was deliberately designed to align with the study's research objectives and theoretical framework, drawing from Berry's (1997) acculturation model and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory. The questions were divided into thematic areas reflecting key aspects of academic and cultural adaptation.

- **Personal Background and Initial Impressions (Questions 1–2):** These questions were designed to establish context by eliciting participants' academic programmes, length of stay, and prior English exposure. They also provided insights into students' initial perceptions of the UK academic environment compared to China, which is critical in identifying contrasts and adaptation challenges.
- **Academic Challenges and Classroom Expectations (Questions 3, 5, 7, 8, 10):** These items explored difficulties encountered in coursework, assessments,

and communication. Particular emphasis was placed on the role of English proficiency, as language barriers are often identified as central obstacles to international students' academic self-efficacy (Andrade, 2006). The questions also probed strategies and support services accessed by students, enabling evaluation of institutional support effectiveness and individual coping mechanisms.

- **Social and Cultural Challenges (Questions 4, 6, 9):** These questions examined the social integration of Chinese students, including peer interactions, lecturer relationships, and cultural misunderstandings. By capturing examples of cross-cultural miscommunication, this section provided insight into the social dimension of acculturation and its influence on academic confidence.
- **Identity, Growth, and Intercultural Adaptation (Questions 11–15):** These questions focused on the longer-term impact of studying in the UK, addressing personal growth, changes in communication skills, and development of intercultural competence. This section was included to explore how adaptation influences not only academic performance but also broader identity formation and professional aspirations, reflecting the dual focus on academic and personal outcomes.
- **Open Reflection (Question 16):** The final, open-ended question allowed participants to share additional insights beyond the structured themes. This ensured that the research captured unanticipated issues or perspectives, reinforcing the exploratory nature of the study.

Overall, the design of the interview schedule aimed to capture the multifaceted experience of Chinese international students. By combining questions on academic and social challenges with reflections on adaptation and growth, the interviews complemented the questionnaire data and provided rich, contextualised insights into how language proficiency and cultural integration shape academic achievement.

3.3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis was employed to identify general patterns of self-efficacy, stress, and flourishing within the sample. Correlational analysis was conducted to examine relationships between English language proficiency, cultural integration, and academic self-efficacy. This provided insight into the extent to which language and cultural factors influence academic achievement.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initial coding was conducted inductively, followed by grouping codes into broader themes such as *language-related challenges*, *academic support systems*, and *intercultural interactions*. NVivo software was used to support the coding process and ensure systematic organisation of themes. Thematic analysis allowed for nuanced

interpretation of how students experienced the interplay between language, culture, and academic success.

Coding Process Using NVivo

The semi-structured interview transcripts were imported into **NVivo** to facilitate systematic qualitative data analysis. The coding process followed a **thematic analysis approach**, combining both deductive (based on research questions) and inductive (emerging from the data) strategies.

1 Data Preparation: Each transcript was transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo.

Transcripts were then reviewed to ensure accuracy before coding.

2 Initial (Open) Coding: Line-by-line coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of text. Codes were assigned to segments that captured participants' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. At this stage, a large number of descriptive codes were generated (e.g., *"language barriers," "workload stress," "group work challenges," "cultural misunderstanding," "independence and confidence"*).

3 Axial Coding (Clustering Codes into Categories): Similar codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, *"language barriers," "academic writing difficulties," and "communication with lecturers"* were clustered under the category **Academic Challenges**. Similarly, *"making friends," "social distance," and "homesickness"* were grouped under **Social and Cultural Adjustment**.

- 4 Thematic Development:** Categories were further refined into overarching themes aligned with the research questions. Three key themes emerged:
- a) **Academic Challenges and Adaptation** (e.g., difficulties in workload management, academic writing, and communication).
 - b) **Language Proficiency and Communication** (e.g., impact of English skills on participation, confidence, and peer interaction).
 - c) **Cultural Integration and Identity** (e.g., intercultural experiences, coping strategies, and identity transformation).
- 5 Validation and Refinement:** Themes were cross-checked against the raw data to ensure consistency and validity. Overlapping codes were merged, and redundant codes were eliminated. Memos were also written in NVivo to capture reflections during the coding process.

Integration of Data

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated during interpretation. This triangulation approach enhanced the validity of the study by cross-verifying results from multiple sources (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013). For example, statistical associations between English proficiency and self-efficacy were complemented by interview accounts illustrating how improved language ability fostered confidence in academic contexts.

3.3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution prior to data collection.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying details were removed from transcripts and datasets. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices in compliance with data protection guidelines.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Given the potential sensitivity of discussing academic stress and cultural adjustment, interviews were conducted with care and participants were signposted to student support services where appropriate. Ethical reflexivity was maintained throughout the study, ensuring respect for participants' autonomy and well-being (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

To ensure the study's credibility and reliability, the following strategies were employed:

- **Credibility:** Triangulation of data sources (questionnaire and interviews) and member checking with participants to validate findings.
- **Transferability:** Providing rich, thick descriptions to allow readers to assess applicability to other contexts.
- **Dependability:** Maintaining an audit trail of research decisions and processes.
- **Confirmability:** Reflective journaling by the researcher to acknowledge and mitigate biases.

3.4 Potential Limitations

Potential limitations of the study include:

- **Self-Selection Bias:** Participants who volunteered may have had more pronounced experiences, potentially skewing the data.
- **Language Barriers:** Despite offering interviews in Mandarin, nuances may have been lost in translation.
- **Generalizability:** Findings may not be generalizable to all Chinese students due to the qualitative nature of the study.

3.6 Summary

This chapter has outlined the philosophical foundations, research design, and methodological procedures underpinning the study. By adopting a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, and by integrating Berry's acculturation framework with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, the research provides a comprehensive lens for exploring the relationship between English language proficiency, cultural integration, and academic achievement among Chinese students in the UK. A mixed-methods approach enabled both breadth and depth of analysis, while ethical and reflexive practices ensured the integrity of the research process.

Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explored the **factors influencing Chinese students' academic achievements in the UK**, with a focus on **English language proficiency** and **cultural integration**. Data was gathered through a **questionnaire** completed by 39 Chinese students, complemented by **semi-structured interviews** with six additional students across undergraduate, Master's, and PhD levels.

By combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, the chapter identifies common trends while giving voice to individual experiences. The findings are organised into four overarching themes:

1. **English language proficiency and communication**
2. **Adaptation to UK academic culture**
3. **Socio-cultural integration and psychological adjustment**
4. **Institutional support and coping strategies**

Each section presents questionnaire results followed by interview insights to provide a richer understanding of the issues.

4.2 English Language Proficiency and Communication

4.2.1 Questionnaire Results

Participants Profiles

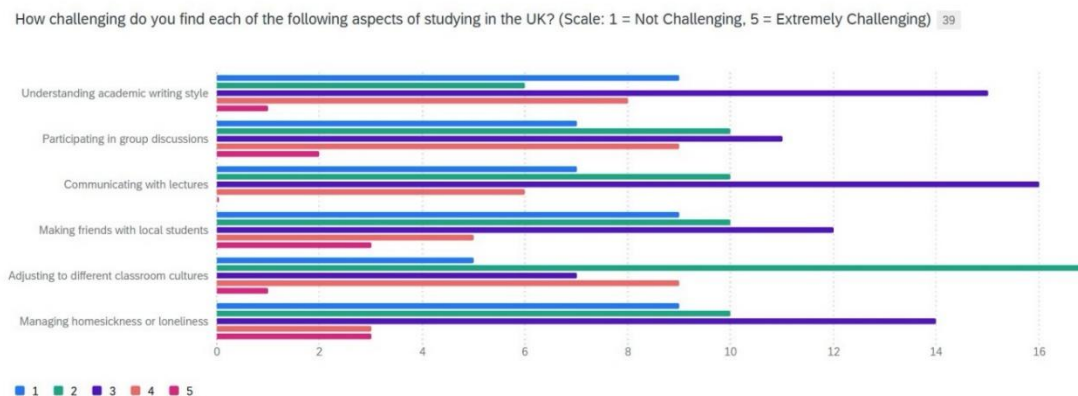
The participants' profile for the questionnaire results consists of 39 Chinese students studying in the UK. The following table presents the details of the participants' profile.

Gender	Male	16	41%
	Female	22	56%
	Non-binary	1	3%
Age	Under 20	5	13%
	21-25	20	51%
	25-30	7	18%
	Over 30	7	18%
Level of Study	Under graduate	15	41%
	Master's	18	49%
	PhD	4	11%
Length of stay in the UK	Less than 6 months	7	18%
	6 months to 1year	12	31%
	1-2 years	10	26%
	More than 2years	10	26%
IELTS Score before come to the UK	Below 6.0	5	13%
	6.0-6.5	13	33%
	7.0-7.5	13	33%
	8 or above	6	15%
	Others	2	5%

The findings indicate that the majority of participants perceived studying in the UK as somewhat challenging. Specifically, 33% (n=13) described their experience as “slightly challenging,” while 28% (n=11) reported it as “moderately challenging.” A further 21% (n=8) found it “very challenging,” highlighting that a considerable proportion of students face notable difficulties during their studies abroad. By contrast, only 18% (n=7) felt that studying in the UK was “not challenging at all.” These results suggest that while some Chinese students adapt relatively smoothly, most encounter varying levels of difficulty, underscoring the importance of support systems to address academic, linguistic, and cultural challenges.

The results show that Chinese students encountered varying degrees of difficulty across different aspects of studying in the UK. The greatest challenge identified was **understanding academic writing style**, with 61% of respondents rating it as moderately

to highly challenging (scores 3–5). Similarly, **participating in group discussions** (58%) and **communicating with lecturers** (56%) were also reported as challenging areas, reflecting potential barriers related to language proficiency and academic communication norms. In contrast, **adjusting to different classroom cultures** appeared less problematic, with nearly half of the participants (45%) rating it as not very challenging (scores 1–2). Likewise, **making friends with local students** and **managing homesickness or loneliness** presented mixed experiences: while some students found these aspects manageable, a notable proportion (41% and 51% respectively) still considered them moderately challenging. Overall, these findings highlight that language-related and academic interaction issues were the most significant challenges, while cultural adjustment was comparatively easier for many participants.



4.2.2 Interview Insights

Interviews revealed that even students with high IELTS scores (7.0–7.5) continued to struggle with academic discourse. For example, one Master's student explained:

“I can read textbooks, but when classmates speak very fast in seminars, I can only catch about 70%. By the time I organise my thoughts, the discussion has already moved on.”

Another interviewee admitted avoiding participation due to fear of embarrassment:

“We are afraid of talking to others... we don’t want them to think our English is not as good.”

This highlights how **anxiety, lack of confidence, and cultural notions of “face”** amplify language barriers, leading to silence in class (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

4.2.3 Cross-Analysis

The quantitative data showed a clear skill imbalance, while the qualitative evidence revealed how this imbalance translated into **missed opportunities, reduced participation, and lower confidence**. Thus, English proficiency emerged not only as a practical challenge but also as a psychological one, shaping academic and social outcomes (Zhou & Todman, 2009).

4.3 Adaptation to UK Academic Culture

4.3.1 Questionnaire Results

More than **70% of respondents** reported difficulty adapting to the UK's seminar-based teaching style. Similarly, **two-thirds** struggled with coursework and essay-based assessment, having been more accustomed to exam-centred evaluation in China.

4.3.2 Interview Insights

Students consistently described the transition as a “**pedagogical shock.**” Kaya, a Master's student, contrasted the two systems:

“In China everything is spoon-fed. Teachers give you the key points, and you memorise. Here, you must read many materials yourself and develop your own view. At first, it was very hard.”

Sean, another participant, shared how group projects revealed cultural differences in approach:

“I wanted to divide the tasks quickly, but British students preferred brainstorming first. They thought I didn't want to cooperate, but actually I just followed what I was used to in China.”

The workload was another common concern. Yang explained:

“Managing multiple essays, group projects, and also daily chores was overwhelming. In China I only needed to focus on exams.”

4.3.3 Cross-Analysis

While questionnaires revealed widespread difficulties with academic adaptation, interviews showed **why**—differences in teaching philosophy, expectations for independent learning, and group dynamics. Over time, however, some students described personal growth, noting improvements in time management and critical thinking. This supports the argument that adaptation is stressful initially but ultimately transformative (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008).

4.4 Socio-Cultural Integration and Psychological Adjustment

4.4.1 Questionnaire Results

Almost half of respondents reported primarily socialising with other Chinese students. Only **18%** said they had formed close friendships with British peers. Those who engaged more with international or local students also reported higher confidence in class discussions.

Psychological stress was significant: **over 50% of students** reported feeling isolated or anxious, especially in their first term.

4.4.2 Interview Insights

Interviews revealed **mixed experiences of social integration**. Jessica admitted:

“Most of my friends are Chinese. It’s comfortable because we understand each other, but it also means my English doesn’t improve much.”

Sean described feeling excluded from British peer conversations:

“They talk about TV shows or pubs, and I cannot join in. I just sit quietly.”

Yet, other students noted growth over time. A PhD student explained:

“At the beginning I felt lost, but gradually I became more independent and confident. Now I see myself as a problem solver.”

The concept of “face” was also a recurring theme. Students feared making grammatical mistakes or being laughed at, which inhibited help-seeking and participation.

4.4.3 Cross-Analysis

Survey data showed that **social isolation correlated with lower classroom participation**, while interviews highlighted the underlying cultural and psychological factors (fear, loss of face, lack of common ground). This demonstrates that integration is not just about forming friendships but about developing **confidence and cultural competence** (Montgomery, 2010; Berry, 1997).

4.5 Institutional Support and Coping Strategies

4.5.1 Questionnaire Results

Awareness and use of university support services varied. Around **40% of respondents** attended EAP classes or writing workshops, while others reported not using them, often citing time constraints or lack of awareness.

Peer support was common: **over 60%** of respondents relied on Chinese peers for academic and emotional support.

4.5.2 Interview Insights

Interviews confirmed the **underuse of formal support services**. Kaya admitted:

“I didn’t go to the writing centre because I thought it’s embarrassing. Maybe it means my English is not good enough.”

By contrast, Sean praised his experience:

“The Academic Writing Centre gave very detailed feedback. It really helped me improve my essays.”

Peer support networks were especially valued:

“My Chinese friends help me with assignments. We share resources and explain to each other. It makes me feel less alone.”

For postgraduate students, supervision emerged as a critical factor. One PhD student explained:

“My supervisor is very supportive, always giving guidance and encouraging me. It makes a big difference.”

4.5.3 Cross-Analysis

The survey highlighted **uneven use of institutional support**, while interviews revealed **stigma and lack of awareness** as barriers. Students who overcame these barriers and accessed services described strong benefits, underlining the importance of **normalising support-seeking** (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Gu et al., 2010).

4.6 Cross-Analysis of Questionnaires and Interviews

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings illustrate that:

- **Language, culture, and academic achievement are interconnected.** Limited oral proficiency reduces class participation, which in turn slows integration and academic growth.
- **Chinese peer networks are both supportive and restrictive:** they provide comfort but limit intercultural exposure.
- **Adaptation is dynamic:** initial challenges (linguistic, cultural, academic) often give way to resilience and personal growth when students engage actively with support systems.

4.7 Summary of Findings

1. **Language proficiency:** Reading and writing were stronger than speaking and listening; oral skills and confidence were the greatest challenges.
2. **Academic adaptation:** Students struggled with independent learning, critical thinking, and coursework assessment but eventually developed new skills.
3. **Socio-cultural adjustment:** Many socialised mainly with Chinese peers; integration with British peers was limited but linked to greater confidence.
4. **Support systems:** Peer support was heavily relied upon, while formal services were underutilised due to stigma or lack of awareness.

Overall Academic success depended on navigating the intersection of language proficiency and cultural adaptation, with active engagement and balanced support networks being key.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that influence Chinese students' academic achievements in the United Kingdom, focusing on **English language proficiency** and **cultural integration**. Using a mixed-methods design—questionnaires from 39 students and semi-structured interviews with six others—the research explored

the challenges faced, adaptive strategies employed, and implications for intercultural adaptation.

This discussion chapter interprets the findings in light of existing literature, evaluates methodological limitations, and highlights contributions to knowledge and practice.

5.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

The study was structured around three guiding research questions:

1. **What challenges do Chinese students face in terms of English language proficiency and cultural integration in the UK?**
2. **What adaptive strategies do they employ to overcome these challenges?**
3. **How do these processes of adaptation influence their academic achievements and intercultural adjustment?**

The discussion addresses each question in turn, drawing on both the empirical findings and theoretical frameworks.

5.3 English Language Proficiency as a Foundational Challenge

A central finding of this study is that **English language proficiency—particularly oral and listening skills—remains the most significant barrier** for Chinese students.

Questionnaire results showed that reading and writing skills were rated higher than

speaking and listening, while interviews revealed persistent struggles even among students with strong IELTS scores.

This echoes earlier work (Hu, 2002; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010) showing that Chinese students often arrive in the UK with adequate formal English but lack fluency in spontaneous, discipline-specific, or colloquial communication. Students reported missing opportunities to participate in seminars, struggling with academic presentations, and fearing mistakes that could cause loss of “face.”

The “Chinese bubble” effect, where students predominantly socialise with fellow Mandarin speakers, further reinforces this limitation. While providing comfort, it restricts authentic English practice—confirming Spencer-Oatey and Xiong’s (2006) observation that strong co-national networks can inadvertently slow linguistic and intercultural development.

Importantly, language was not only a barrier in itself but also a **mediator** of other challenges: difficulties in adapting to UK pedagogy, integrating socially, and building confidence. As such, language proficiency should be understood as **foundational rather than isolated**—a precondition for academic and cultural adaptation.

5.4 Adaptation to Academic Culture

Another major theme was the “**pedagogical shock**” experienced by participants.

Students accustomed to structured, teacher-centred learning in China struggled with the UK’s emphasis on independent study, critical thinking, and participation. Questionnaire data indicated that 70% found seminar-style learning difficult, while interviews highlighted confusion around group projects and discomfort with critical writing.

These findings reinforce Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions theory, where Chinese classrooms are more hierarchical and exam-driven, contrasting with the egalitarian, discussion-based practices in the UK. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2008) note that international students often face a steep learning curve in adapting to expectations of originality, referencing, and academic debate.

Yet, over time, several interviewees described **transformational learning experiences**—becoming more independent thinkers, problem-solvers, and self-regulated learners. This suggests that while initial adaptation is stressful, the long-term academic outcomes can be positive, echoing Gu et al.’s (2010) argument that intercultural challenges can also foster personal and academic growth.

Thus, academic culture functions both as a barrier and a catalyst—a source of struggle initially but also a driver of resilience and skill development when students adapt successfully.

5.6 Institutional Support and Adaptive Strategies

Both datasets highlighted the **underutilisation of formal support services**. While universities offered English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, writing centres, and workshops, many students did not access them—due to lack of awareness, perceived stigma, or a belief they should solve problems independently. This echoes Gu et al. (2010), who note that international students often delay seeking help.

Those who did engage with support reported substantial benefits. For example, one student described writing-centre feedback as “invaluable.” Similarly, supportive supervisory relationships were described as crucial for postgraduate students’ academic success, reinforcing Spencer-Oatey and Xiong’s (2006) findings.

Alongside institutional support, students developed **personal coping strategies**: watching lecture recordings repeatedly, using translation tools, forming study groups, and practising English in informal contexts. These align with Wang and Shan’s (2007) findings on the role of strategic learning behaviours in academic adaptation.

However, while peer support within Chinese groups was a common and effective coping strategy, it also risked reinforcing linguistic and cultural isolation. Students who combined Chinese peer networks with intercultural friendships reported the most successful adaptation—suggesting that **balanced social networks** are key.

5.7 Interconnections: Language, Culture, and Achievement

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration of the **interconnectedness of language proficiency, cultural integration, and academic achievement**.

- Language barriers limited participation in seminars and group work.
- Limited integration reduced opportunities to practise English.
- Academic culture shock magnified both linguistic and cultural challenges.
- Positive adaptation required both improved language skills and broader social engagement.

This interdependence reinforces the argument that academic performance cannot be understood purely in terms of linguistic ability or cultural fit alone, but rather as the product of their interaction (Zhou & Todman, 2009; Lu, Wang Guénier & Hird, 2025).

5.8 Limitations and Reflections on Data Collection

5.8.1 Sample Size and Representativeness

The study used 39 questionnaire respondents and six interviews. While sufficient for an exploratory study, the relatively small sample size limits generalisability. The sample was also skewed towards Master's students, reflecting national trends but underrepresenting undergraduates.

5.8.2 Self-Selection Bias

Participants were self-selected, which may have led to overrepresentation of students more willing to share experiences. Those facing more severe challenges may have been less likely to participate, potentially underestimating difficulties.

5.8.3 Questionnaire Limitations

The questionnaire relied on self-report measures, which may reflect perceptions rather than actual proficiency or performance. Future studies might combine surveys with direct performance measures (e.g., grades, language assessments).

5.8.4 Interview Reflections

The six semi-structured interviews provided depth but were limited in scope. Interviews were conducted in English, which may have constrained expression for less confident participants. Conducting bilingual interviews could have provided richer data.

5.9 Contributions to the Field

5.9.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to theory by demonstrating the **mutual reinforcement of language proficiency and cultural integration** in shaping academic success. While prior literature often treats these as separate challenges, the findings show they are deeply interconnected.

It also supports and extends Berry's (1997) acculturation model by illustrating how students move dynamically between separation (staying in Chinese groups), marginalisation (feeling excluded), and eventual integration.

5.9.2 Empirical Contributions

Empirically, the study adds to the limited body of work combining quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data on Chinese students in the UK. By triangulating both methods, the research provides a more nuanced picture than either could alone.

The inclusion of both Master's and PhD students also broadens understanding beyond the commonly studied undergraduate cohort.

5.9.3 Practical Contributions

For practice, the study offers insights for UK universities:

- **Language support** should go beyond general EAP courses to discipline-specific writing and oral communication training.
- **Structured intercultural engagement** (e.g., buddy schemes, mixed group projects) can reduce isolation.
- **Supervisor training** should emphasise intercultural sensitivity, particularly for postgraduate students.
- **Promotion of support services** must be proactive and ongoing to overcome stigma and lack of awareness.

For Chinese students, the findings emphasise the importance of:

- Engaging with diverse peer groups.
- Using institutional support early.
- Developing proactive learning strategies.

These contributions align with recent calls for universities to better support Chinese students' adaptation (Holliman et al., 2023; HEPI, 2024).

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings of the study in relation to existing literature, highlighted the interconnected challenges of language and cultural integration, and reflected on methodological limitations. The contributions of the study are both theoretical—reinforcing the interdependence of linguistic and cultural adaptation—and practical—providing recommendations for universities and students alike.

The next chapter will synthesise these findings into final conclusions and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the key findings of the study on **factors influencing Chinese students' academic achievements in the UK**, with a particular focus on **English language proficiency** and **cultural integration**. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined questionnaires (39 respondents) with semi-structured interviews (six participants), the research has provided a rich account of the challenges faced by Chinese students, the adaptive strategies they employ, and the institutional and personal factors that shape their success.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

6.2.1 English Language Proficiency

A major finding was that oral and listening skills remain the most significant challenge, even for students with high IELTS scores. Reading and writing were relatively stronger, reflecting China's exam-oriented system (Hu, 2002).

Language was not just a barrier in itself but also a mediator of other difficulties, shaping students' ability to participate in seminars, adapt to independent learning, and integrate socially (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010). Fear of making mistakes, or "losing face," inhibited participation, leading many to remain silent in class.

6.2.2 Adaptation to UK Academic Culture

Students experienced a "**pedagogical shock**" when transitioning from structured, teacher-led Chinese classrooms to UK universities' emphasis on critical thinking, self-

directed study, and coursework-based assessment (Hofstede, 2001). Initial confusion and stress gave way, over time, to personal growth, as some participants became more independent and confident learners (Zhou et al., 2008).

6.2.3 Socio-Cultural Integration and Psychological Adjustment

Most participants primarily socialised with Chinese peers. While this provided comfort and emotional support, it limited opportunities for intercultural engagement and English practice. Those who successfully built relationships with British and international peers reported greater academic confidence and improved language skills, confirming Berry's (1997) integration model.

Psychological stress—particularly during the first months—was a recurring theme, with students reporting isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt. Over time, however, some students described a transformation into more resilient, independent thinkers.

6.2.4 Institutional Support and Adaptive Strategies

Formal support services such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses and writing centres were underutilised, often due to lack of awareness or stigma (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). However, students who accessed these services reported substantial benefits.

Students also relied heavily on **peer support** within Chinese groups, which provided stability but risked limiting integration. Those who combined Chinese and intercultural

peer networks reported better outcomes. Supervisory relationships were particularly vital for postgraduate students.

6.2.5 Interconnectedness of Factors

The findings demonstrate that language proficiency, cultural integration, and academic achievement are **mutually reinforcing**. Success depended not simply on improving English or adapting culturally in isolation, but on the ability to navigate both simultaneously.

6.3 Practical Recommendations

6.3.1 For UK Universities

There are some practical recommendations for UK universities to considerate to Enhance English Support by Developing discipline-specific EAP provision (e.g., academic writing in engineering, business communication). Offering targeted oral communication training (seminar participation, presentations, debates). Promote writing centres, workshops, and wellbeing services proactively and repeatedly.

Provide intercultural training for supervisors, particularly for postgraduate students, to foster supportive academic relationships.

6.3.2 For Chinese Students

Engage Beyond Comfort Zones: Balance Chinese friendship networks with opportunities to interact with domestic and international peers. Participate actively in seminars, even with small contributions, to build confidence gradually.

Adopt Proactive Learning Strategies: Use resources such as lecture recordings, translation tools, and bilingual dictionaries strategically.

Seek Support Early: Engage with university writing centres, language workshops, and wellbeing services without hesitation. Recognise that support is a resource for success, not a sign of weakness.

6.3.3 For Policy Makers

Pre-Departure Preparation: Collaborate with Chinese universities to prepare students for UK teaching styles, expectations of critical thinking, and academic conventions.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Future research should track Chinese students across their academic journey to capture the dynamic process of adaptation, from initial challenges to eventual transformation.
2. **Comparative Perspectives:** Studies could compare Chinese students with other international student groups, highlighting similarities and differences in adaptation experiences.

3. **Quantitative-Qualitative Integration:**Combining survey data with direct performance indicators (e.g., grades, language assessments) would provide a more robust understanding of how language and cultural integration impact achievement.
4. **Postgraduate Focus:**Given the importance of supervisory relationships, further research on PhD students' experiences would be valuable.
5. **Impact of Digital Communication:**The role of WeChat and other platforms in shaping Chinese students' peer networks and integration warrants further exploration (Holliman et al., 2023).

6.5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that English language proficiency and cultural integration are central, interconnected factors shaping Chinese students' academic experiences in the UK. While reading and writing were relatively strong, weaknesses in speaking and listening limited participation. Pedagogical shock, social isolation, and underuse of institutional support further compounded challenges. Yet, many students described personal growth, resilience, and eventual adaptation.

The research contributes to the field by highlighting the mutual reinforcement of language and culture in academic adaptation, the dynamic nature of student adjustment, and the crucial role of balanced support networks.

For UK universities, the study underscores the importance of discipline-specific support, structured intercultural engagement, and proactive promotion of services. For Chinese students, it highlights the value of stepping outside comfort zones, adopting proactive strategies, and seeking support early.

Ultimately, successful academic achievement for Chinese students in the UK is not solely about mastering English or integrating culturally—it is about navigating the intersection of language, culture, and academic practice. Supporting this process requires effort from institutions, students, and policymakers alike.

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