

Exploring Faculty Leadership Support Through International Students' Lived Academic Experiences: A Case Study at Northeast Normal University, China

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Abstract: This study explored faculty leadership support through the lived academic experiences of international master's students at Northeast Normal University (NENU), China. Guided by Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory, the study aimed to understand how students experience academic life, perceive faculty leadership support, and how such support influences their academic engagement and adaptation. A qualitative phenomenological case study design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with nine purposively selected international students. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). Results revealed that supportive faculty practices such as guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement enhance students' academic confidence and motivation. Faculty support was also found to significantly shape students' sense of belonging and academic integration, confirming its central role in their learning experiences.

The study concludes that faculty leadership support is essential for international students' successful academic adjustment and integration. It recommends strengthening culturally responsive teaching, improving faculty-student communication, and enhancing inclusive pedagogical practices, while also encouraging students to take active roles in seeking academic support. These findings contribute to improving internationalized higher education practices in Chinese university contexts.

Keywords: Faculty leadership support, international students, academic integration, academic environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Faculty leadership support refers to how academic staff guide, facilitate, and enhance student learning experiences. In higher education contexts, faculty members function not only as subject-matter experts but also as academic leaders who influence students' learning trajectories through pedagogical practices, mentorship, and engagement (Bland et al., 2009; Ramsden, 2003). Instructional leadership, traditionally associated with school leadership, has been extended to higher education to emphasize the role of educators in improving teaching and learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Studies have demonstrated that effective instructional and faculty leadership positively affect teaching quality, student motivation, and academic achievement through practices such as clear communication, formative feedback, and inclusive pedagogy (Hattie, 2009; Gibbs, 2013; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Moreover, faculty leadership that incorporates culturally responsive teaching practices has been shown to enhance student engagement, particularly in diverse and internationalized classrooms (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This underscores the centrality of faculty leadership in shaping meaningful and productive learning environments.

For international students, faculty leadership support is particularly critical due to the unique and multifaceted challenges they encounter. These challenges include language barriers, cultural differences, unfamiliar pedagogical norms, and difficulties in social and academic adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Sawir et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). Research consistently shows that international students often struggle to navigate new academic systems, and their success is largely influenced by their interactions with faculty and institutional support structures (Glass et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Furthermore, experiences such as marginalization, lack of belonging, and limited engagement with instructors can significantly hinder their academic participation and performance (Marginson, 2014; Wu et al., 2015; Yu & Wright, 2016). Studies also indicate that supportive faculty behaviors such as empathy, accessibility, and constructive feedback can mitigate these challenges and promote positive academic outcomes (Heng, 2018; Lee, 2017). These findings highlight the importance of responsive and inclusive faculty practices in facilitating international students' adaptation and success.

Despite the growing body of literature on international student experiences and instructional leadership, a significant gap remains. Existing studies tend to examine these domains separately, focusing either on leadership practices from the perspectives of administrators and faculty or on student experiences in isolation (Hallinger, 2011; Marginson, 2014). There is limited research that integrates these perspectives to explore how faculty leadership support is experienced and interpreted by international students, particularly within the context of Chinese higher education (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Yang, 2014). Furthermore, much of the existing research is concentrated in Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate in non-Western settings (de Wit, 2020; Knight, 2015). This gap is noteworthy given the rapid expansion of international education in China and the need for context-specific, empirically grounded insights.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how international students at Northeast Normal University interpret faculty leadership support through their lived academic experiences. Qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena and capturing participants' perspectives in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By focusing on subjective experiences and meanings, the study seeks to uncover how faculty practices influence students' academic engagement, adaptation, and overall learning journeys. The purpose of this research is therefore twofold: (1) to deepen understanding of international students' lived academic experiences, and (2) to interpret these experiences as reflections of faculty leadership support within a specific institutional and cultural context.

Contribution of the Study

This study makes several important contributions to literature. First, it bridges the gap between instructional leadership and international student experience research by integrating these two domains within a single analytical framework (Hallinger, 2011; Andrade, 2006). Second, it provides empirical insights from the under-researched context of Chinese higher education, thereby contributing to the diversification of global higher education research (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Yang, 2014). Third, by employing a phenomenological approach, the study foregrounds students' voices and offers nuanced understandings of how faculty leadership is experienced in practice (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These contributions have significant implications for policy, practice, and future research, particularly in enhancing faculty development, promoting inclusive teaching practices, and improving support systems for international students in increasingly globalized higher education environments (de Wit, 2020; Knight, 2015).

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore the lived academic experiences of international students at Northeast Normal University within a Chinese higher education context.
2. To examine international students' perceptions of faculty leadership support in their academic environment.
3. To investigate the influence of faculty leadership support on international students' academic engagement and adaptation.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do international students describe their lived academic experiences at Northeast Normal University?
2. How do international students perceive faculty leadership support in their academic environment?
3. How does faculty leadership support influence international students' academic engagement and adaptation?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Faculty Leadership Support

Faculty leadership support in higher education refers to the range of instructional, relational, pedagogical, and organizational behaviors exhibited by academic staff that facilitate students' learning, engagement, and academic success (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush, 2018; Spillane et al., 2004). It encompasses instructional guidance, academic mentoring, constructive feedback, advising, emotional support, and the deliberate creation of inclusive and supportive learning environments (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Within the instructional leadership framework, faculty members are conceptualized not only as knowledge transmitters but also as academic leaders who actively shape learning environments and influence student outcomes (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). Instructional leadership theory emphasizes improving teaching quality, strengthening curriculum delivery, and fostering collaborative learning environments that enhance student achievement and engagement (Leithwood et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). In higher education settings, this leadership role extends beyond cognitive instruction to include socio-emotional support, mentoring relationships, and facilitation of learner autonomy (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Tight, 2019).

Empirical research further suggests that effective faculty leadership is strongly associated with continuous professional development, pedagogical innovation, and reflective teaching practices (Gibbs & Coffey, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Faculty who employs student-centered pedagogies and transformational leadership approaches tend to enhance student motivation, academic resilience, and deep learning outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2021; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Additionally, academic leadership is increasingly understood as distributed rather than hierarchical, emphasizing collaborative responsibility for student success across institutional actors (Spillane, 2006; Gronn, 2002).

In the context of internationalized higher education, faculty leadership support is closely linked to intercultural competence and inclusive pedagogy. Scholars argue that culturally responsive teaching is essential for addressing the diverse academic needs of international students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Dearthoff, 2006). Faculty who demonstrates intercultural sensitivity, adaptive communication, and awareness of linguistic diversity are better equipped to support international student learning and integration (Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Bennett, 2008). This aligns with global higher education discourse emphasizing equity, inclusion, and internationalization at home (Knight, 2015; Marginson, 2016; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

International Students' Lived Academic Experiences

International students' lived academic experiences refer to their subjective interpretations, meanings, and perceptions constructed through academic, social, and cultural interactions within host university environments (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2009). These experiences are shaped by both institutional structures and interpersonal relationships, particularly interactions with faculty, peers, and academic systems (Kim, 2012; Gu, 2011).

A substantial body of empirical literature indicates that international students encounter multifaceted academic challenges, including language barriers, academic writing difficulties, unfamiliar pedagogical expectations, and limited engagement with faculty members (Andrade, 2006; Tran, 2013; Arkoudis et al., 2019). These challenges often affect participation, confidence, and academic performance, particularly in contexts where academic cultures differ significantly from students' home systems (Sawir et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2020).

From a sociocultural learning perspective, knowledge construction is understood as a socially situated process of participation within communities of practice, where interaction and belonging are central to learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). However, international students frequently report marginalization, social isolation, and limited academic

belonging when institutional support structures are inadequate (Tinto, 1993; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Glass & Westmont, 2014). These conditions directly influence persistence, engagement, and overall academic satisfaction.

Furthermore, research highlights that mismatches between home and host academic cultures significantly affect students' adjustment processes (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008). Differences in assessment practices, classroom participation norms, and teaching styles often require complex academic and psychological adaptation (Brown, 2009; Leask, 2015). These transitional experiences shape not only academic outcomes but also identity negotiation and belongingness within the institution (Marginson, 2014; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

Influence of Faculty Leadership Support on Academic Experiences

Faculty leadership support plays a critical and multidimensional role in shaping international students' academic experiences, engagement, and adaptation processes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009; Tight, 2020). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that positive faculty-student interactions significantly enhance academic motivation, participation, and persistence (Nora & Crisp, 2012; Reason et al., 2010). When faculty provide clear instructional guidance, timely feedback, and emotional encouragement, students are more likely to develop academic confidence and deeper cognitive engagement (Tinto, 2017; Komarraju et al., 2010).

Theoretically, Tinto's student integration model emphasizes that both academic and social integration are essential for student persistence and success (Tinto, 1993, 2012). Faculty leadership support is central to this integration process, as it facilitates meaningful academic engagement and strengthens students' sense of belonging within institutional communities (Kuh et al., 2011). Similarly, Schlossberg's transition theory highlights the importance of supportive relationships in enabling individuals to cope with change and navigate unfamiliar environments effectively (Schlossberg, 1981; Goodman et al., 2006).

In addition, culturally responsive pedagogy has been widely recognized as essential in improving international students' learning experiences and outcomes (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). Faculty who integrates inclusive teaching practices, acknowledge cultural diversity, and adapt instructional strategies contribute significantly to academic satisfaction and equity in learning (Leask, 2015; Ryan, 2011). Transformational leadership behaviors, including inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, further enhance student engagement and academic resilience (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory, which explains that student persistence and success in higher education are largely determined by the extent of their academic and social integration within the institutional environment (Tinto, 1993; 2012). Tinto argues that students who successfully integrate into both the formal academic system and informal social networks of a university are more likely to develop a strong sense of belonging, which in turn enhances their commitment, motivation, and likelihood of academic success. In this sense, integration is not only structural but also deeply experiential and process-oriented, making the theory particularly relevant for understanding the lived academic experiences of international students in cross-cultural higher education contexts (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Within the context of this study, faculty leadership support is conceptualized as a central mechanism through which academic integration is facilitated or hindered. Faculty members function as key institutional actors who shape students' academic journeys through instructional practices, mentorship, feedback, communication, and relational engagement. According to Tinto's framework, positive and frequent interactions with faculty significantly enhance students' academic integration, while weak or inconsistent faculty engagement may contribute to feelings of isolation, marginalization, and reduced persistence (Tinto, 1993; 2012). Therefore, faculty leadership support becomes a critical analytical lens for examining how international students at Northeast Normal University experience academic inclusion, adaptation, and participation within the institutional setting.

From a phenomenological standpoint, this theoretical framework enables a deeper exploration of how international students interpret and construct meaning around their academic experiences in relation to faculty leadership support. Rather than treating integration as a purely measurable outcome, Tinto's theory, when applied in this study, highlights integration as a lived, subjective, and evolving process shaped by daily academic interactions, emotional responses, and social engagement. The key implication of this framework for the study is that it positions faculty leadership support not merely as an

institutional variable but as a lived relational experience that directly influences international students' sense of belonging, academic adjustment, and persistence in a Chinese higher education context. Consequently, the study uses Tinto's theory to critically examine how faculty practices either promote or constrain students' academic and social integration, thereby shaping their overall university experience.

RESEARCH GAP

Most existing studies on international students focus on structural and institutional factors, often treating integration as an outcome rather than a lived academic process (Tinto, 1993; 2012). There is limited research on how faculty leadership support is experienced and interpreted in everyday academic interactions, especially within Chinese higher education contexts. Additionally, few studies adopt a phenomenological lens to explore how faculty practices shape the subjective dimensions of international students' academic integration and sense of belonging.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore how international master's students at Northeast Normal University (NENU) in China experience and interpret faculty leadership support in their academic lives. Phenomenology is appropriate as it focuses on understanding the essence of lived experiences rather than measuring variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The target population consists of international master's students at NENU. A sample of nine (9) participants were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling, including only those who have studied at the university for at least one semester to ensure informed and meaningful reflections on faculty leadership support (Patton, 2015).

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 10–15 minutes each. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and convenient setting, face-to-face. Before data collection, participants signed an informed consent form confirming voluntary participation, confidentiality, the right to withdraw at any time, and agreement to audio recording. All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission), transcribed verbatim, and checked against recordings for accuracy. Identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This involves familiarization with data, generating initial codes, developing and refining themes, and producing a coherent narrative of findings. Constant comparison across participants' accounts was maintained to ensure interpretations remain grounded in the data and reflect lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical approval was obtained before the study began. The study ensured voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, secure data storage, and participants' right to withdraw without penalty. All recordings and transcripts were stored on protected devices accessible only to the researcher, ensuring full compliance with qualitative research ethics.

III. FINDINGS

Supportive Faculty Practices as Enablers of Academic Confidence

Participants consistently described faculty members as key enablers of their academic confidence through guidance, feedback, and encouragement. Participant A explained, *"When I first started my thesis, I was confused, but my supervisor broke everything into small steps and even shared examples. That made me feel capable."* Similarly, Participant C noted, *"Some lecturers repeat explanations and even simplify concepts for us. It makes a big difference because sometimes we struggle with language."* Participant H added, *"When a teacher says, 'You are doing well, just improve this part,' I feel motivated instead of discouraged."* These responses indicate that structured academic support, patience, and constructive feedback play a significant role in building students' confidence and competence. This demonstrates that faculty leadership support directly enhances international students' academic self-efficacy and integration.

Faculty Support as a Driver of Motivation and Engagement

Participants strongly linked faculty support to their academic motivation and willingness to engage in learning activities. Participant G remarked, *"When a lecturer encourages participation, I feel more confident to speak, even if my English is not perfect."* Participant H stated, *"Detailed feedback helps me improve, and I become more interested in the subject."*

Participant A added, *“If a teacher shows interest in my progress, I feel responsible to work harder.”* Conversely, Participant D noted, *“When there is little feedback, I lose interest because I don’t know if I am doing well.”* These insights demonstrate that faculty encouragement, recognition, and feedback significantly influence students’ motivation and active participation. This theme aligns with the study’s aim of understanding how faculty leadership support shapes academic engagement.

Sense of Belonging and Academic Integration

The sense of belonging emerged as both an outcome and a process influenced by faculty interactions. Participant I shared, *“When teachers ask for our opinions and include us in discussions, I feel like part of the class.”* Participant B stated, *“Group activities guided by teachers help me connect with others and feel included.”* However, Participant F expressed, *“Sometimes I feel invisible in class, especially when communication is limited.”* Participant C added, *“Supportive teachers make me feel comfortable, but in some classes, I feel like an outsider.”* These mixed experiences suggest that faculty practices play a critical role in fostering or limiting students’ sense of belonging. This reinforces the study’s focus on how faculty leadership contributes to academic and social integration.

Enhancing Faculty Leadership Support

Participants offered practical suggestions for improving faculty support for international students. Participant D suggested, *“Teachers should check more often if international students understand the content.”* Participant E recommended, *“Using simpler language or giving written explanations would help us a lot.”* Participant F noted, *“More interactive teaching methods would encourage us to participate.”* Participant H added, *“Faculty could organize informal meetings to better understand international students’ challenges.”* These responses indicate a need for increased cultural awareness, inclusive teaching strategies, and proactive engagement from faculty members. This theme highlights actionable strategies to strengthen faculty leadership support and improve international students’ academic experiences.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Supportive Faculty Practices as Enablers of Academic Confidence

The findings show that when faculty provide guidance, patience, and constructive feedback, international students develop stronger academic confidence. Participants’ experiences, such as receiving step-by-step supervision or encouraging feedback, reflect what Vincent Tinto describes as academic integration, where meaningful faculty-student interactions strengthen students’ commitment and persistence (Tinto, 1993; 2012). This aligns with studies indicating that supportive faculty relationships enhance self-efficacy and reduce academic anxiety among international students (Glass et al., 2015). In this study, support was not perceived as purely instructional but as relational and affirming, helping students feel capable in a new academic environment. Therefore, faculty should adopt more intentional mentoring and supportive feedback practices to strengthen international students’ academic confidence.

Faculty Support as a Driver of Motivation and Engagement

Participants’ reflections demonstrate that encouragement and feedback from faculty significantly influence their motivation and engagement. Positive reinforcement, recognition, and inclusive classroom practices helped students participate more actively and take ownership of their learning. This aligns with motivational theories such as Ryan and Deci’s (2000) work on intrinsic motivation, as well as Tinto’s emphasis on engagement as a key component of integration. Conversely, the absence of feedback led to uncertainty and reduced interest in academic work. These findings highlight that motivation is not only internally driven but also shaped by faculty interactions. It is therefore recommended that faculty provide consistent, constructive, and personalized feedback to sustain students’ motivation and academic engagement.

Sense of Belonging and Academic Integration

The findings illustrate that students’ sense of belonging is fluid and heavily influenced by faculty practices. Inclusive teaching strategies, such as encouraging participation and facilitating discussions, helped students feel valued and part of the academic community. However, limited interaction or unclear communication contributed to feelings of isolation. This aligns with Strayhorn (2012), who identifies belonging as a critical factor in student success, and with Tinto’s view that integration fosters commitment to the institution. The study highlights that belonging is not automatic but is shaped through everyday classroom experiences. Therefore, faculty should intentionally create inclusive and participatory learning environments that strengthen international students’ sense of belonging.

Enhancing Faculty Leadership Support

Participants' suggestions point toward practical improvements in faculty support, including clearer explanations, interactive teaching methods, and greater awareness of international students' challenges. These recommendations align with literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes adapting teaching practices to meet diverse learners' needs (Gay, 2018). The findings suggest that even small adjustments, such as simplifying language or increasing interaction, can significantly improve students' experiences. In line with Tinto's theory, such efforts can enhance both academic and social integration. Thus, institutions should support faculty development initiatives focused on inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, several recommendations are directed toward faculty members at Northeast Normal University. Faculty should strengthen their role as academic leaders by adopting more supportive, inclusive, and student-centered teaching practices. This includes providing timely and constructive feedback, maintaining open and responsive communication, and being more mindful of the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by international students. Enhancing intercultural competence through training programs would also help faculty better understand and respond to diverse student needs. In line with Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory, improving these academic and relational interactions can significantly strengthen students' academic and social integration, thereby improving their engagement, sense of belonging, and overall academic success.

For international students, it is recommended that they take a more proactive role in their academic integration by actively seeking clarification, engaging more in classroom discussions, and building academic relationships with faculty and peers. Students should also make use of available academic support services and not hesitate to communicate their challenges early, especially in cases of language or cultural misunderstanding. Developing confidence in seeking help and participating in academic interactions can further enhance their adjustment and learning experience. Strengthening this active engagement will complement faculty efforts and jointly contribute to a more meaningful and successful academic experience at the university.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored faculty leadership support through the lived academic experiences of international master's students at Northeast Normal University (NENU), using a phenomenological approach informed by Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The findings show that faculty leadership support significantly influences international students' academic adjustment, motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging. Supportive faculty practices such as guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback enhance students' academic engagement and integration into the university environment.

Overall, the study concludes that effective faculty leadership is essential for fostering positive academic experiences and successful integration of international students. Strengthening inclusive teaching practices and improving faculty-student interaction is therefore crucial for enhancing academic success and belonging at NENU.

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