

Exploring International Students' Perspectives on Academic Challenges: *A case study of selected students at Northeast Normal University – China*

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Abstract: This study explores international students' perspectives on academic challenges at Northeast Normal University (NENU), focusing on academic difficulties, adaptation strategies, university support, and emotional experiences. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), the study aimed to understand how international students perceive and navigate academic transitions within a new environment, addressing the gap in research on student adaptation in non-Western contexts. Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten international master's students from diverse national backgrounds, and data were analyzed thematically to ensure credibility and depth. Findings reveal that language barriers, cultural differences in teaching methods, and limited familiarity with academic expectations are the main obstacles to success. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated strong adaptability and resilience through peer collaboration, self-directed learning, and effective time management. While NENU provides valuable academic and social support services, they are often perceived as too general and insufficiently responsive to international students' distinct needs. The study recommends strengthening language assistance, offering culturally responsive academic counselling, organizing several structured orientation programs, and engaging students in shaping support initiatives. Overall, the findings highlight that creating an inclusive, culturally sensitive and student-centred learning environment is vital for enhancing international students' academic success and well-being. Importantly, NENU's continued commitment to academic excellence and global engagement positions it as one of China's leading universities and a respected university internationally, fostering intercultural growth and scholarly achievement.

Keywords: International Students, Perspectives, Academic Challenges, and Northeast Normal University (NENU).

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview

In recent years, the global expansion of higher education has led to a significant rise in international student mobility, with China becoming an increasingly popular destination (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). Universities like Northeast Normal University (NENU) now host students from across America, Africa, Asia, and Europe (Tian, Dervin, & Lu, 2021). While these students benefit from academic opportunities and government-sponsored scholarships, they often encounter academic challenges that are unique to studying in a non-multilingual environment (Zhou & Zhang, 2014; Wang & Tran, 2017). This study focuses on the lived academic experiences of international master's students at NENU, aiming to explore the nature of these challenges, the coping strategies students employ, and how they perceive the academic support provided

by the university (Tian, Dervin, & Lu, 2021). Without such insight, interventions may remain misaligned with students' actual needs. Therefore, there is a clear need for qualitative inquiry into the academic lives of international students at NENU. Exploring their challenges, strategies, and perceptions can help illuminate gaps in university support and identify areas for improvement.

The academic Journey of international students in China is shaped by factors such as language barriers, cultural differences in classroom expectations, and the accessibility of support systems (Wang & Byram, 2011; Tian & Lowe, 2018). Language proficiency, both in English and Mandarin, emerges as a core obstacle influencing classroom participation, comprehension, and engagement with peers and faculty (Heng, 2019; Yu & Moskal, 2019). Additionally, students often struggle to adjust to different pedagogical approaches and academic standards, which can hinder their academic performance and confidence (Marginson, 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). These issues are not only academic but also deeply personal, affecting students' sense of belonging and educational success (Gu & Maley, 2008).

Despite the growing number of international students in China, there remains a lack of qualitative research capturing their voices and experiences within the Chinese higher education context (Tian, Dervin, & Lu, 2021). By employing a qualitative approach, this study seeks to uncover first-hand insights into the challenges faced by international students at NENU, particularly those from different continental backgrounds. The findings can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how academic systems can adapt to better support diverse student populations (Wang & Tran, 2017). Ultimately, this research aims to inform university policies and enhance the inclusiveness, effectiveness, and effectiveness of educational practices in Chinese universities (Huang, 2018)

This study advances the theoretical understanding of international student mobility and academic adjustment by examining the experiences of students in a non-English speaking environment, Chinese higher education, specifically at Northeast Normal University. While much of the existing literature has focused on Western universities, this research fills a critical gap by highlighting how international students navigate academic life in China. By doing so, it contributes to a more global and inclusive academic discourse. Furthermore, the study enriches theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's theory of student integration and Berry's acculturation model by applying them in an underexplored context. The findings offer empirical insights that may help refine these models to better reflect the realities of cross-cultural academic adaptation in diverse university settings.

Practically, the study offers valuable guidance for university administrators, academic staff, and policymakers at NENU and similar universities. It identifies the key academic challenges international students face, such as language barriers, unfamiliar teaching methods, and limited support services, and provides evidence-based recommendations to address them. This can inform the development of more inclusive orientation programs, academic support services, and teaching strategies tailored to a diverse student population. Additionally, the study benefits international students themselves by shedding light on effective coping strategies and available resources. On a broader scale, the research supports national efforts to enhance the quality and global appeal of Chinese higher education, offering insights that can shape university-level improvements and inform policy reforms aimed at fostering a supportive learning environment for international students.

Research Objectives

The research was conducted under the guidance of the following three (3) specific research objectives:

1. To identify and examine the key academic challenges experienced by international students enrolled at NENU
2. To explore the strategies and methods used by international students to navigate academic difficulties and seek academic support
3. To examine how international students perceive Northeast Normal University's (NENU) formal academic support services in assisting them to overcome their key academic challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the key academic challenges faced by international students at NENU?
2. How do international students navigate these challenges and seek academic support?
3. How do international students perceive NENU's formal academic support services in helping them overcome their key academic challenges?

II. LITERATURE

The Global Landscape of International Student Mobility

The internationalisation of higher education has led to a significant increase in students studying abroad, with China emerging as a prominent destination. Factors contributing to this trend include China's expanding global influence, scholarship opportunities, and the development of higher education infrastructure (Li & Bray, 2007). Universities such as Northeast Normal University (NENU) have experienced a growing influx of international students, particularly from developing regions in South America, South Asia, and Africa. This demographic shift enriches cultural diversity and fosters international collaboration. However, it also presents challenges in meeting diverse academic expectations and needs (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Notably, while global discussions on international student experiences are extensive, much of the research focuses on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding the unique experiences of international students in Chinese universities.

Language Barriers and Academic Communication

Language proficiency remains a central factor influencing international students' academic success and social integration. Even when instruction is in English, students often encounter difficulties with discipline-specific vocabulary, rapid speech, and participation in classroom discussions (Andrade, 2006). In multilingual Chinese settings, administrative communication and informal interactions in Mandarin can impose additional challenges, further affecting students' access to support and their engagement with peers and faculty (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). These difficulties suggest that language is not merely a technical skill but a key determinant of both academic and sociocultural integration, highlighting the need for language support programs tailored to diverse learning contexts.

Cross-Cultural Academic Adjustment

Cultural differences in teaching and learning practices significantly shape international students' experiences. Many students arrive from educational systems emphasizing rote learning, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and limited classroom dialogue, contrasting with China's participatory or discussion-oriented approaches (Han, Li, Bao, & Cao, 2020). This mismatch can lead to misunderstandings, challenges with assessment expectations, and difficulties adhering to academic integrity standards, particularly regarding referencing and plagiarism (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The literature suggests that students' ability to navigate these differences is critical not only for academic achievement but also for psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). A synthesis of these findings indicates that successful academic adjustment requires both personal adaptability and institutional support structures capable of bridging cultural gaps.

University Academic Support for International Students

Institutional support is a critical determinant of international students' academic integration. Orientation programs, language assistance, and counselling services are widely available; however, students frequently perceive these offerings as insufficiently responsive to their diverse needs. Research in Shaanxi Province, for instance, revealed that international students rated university support and faculty communication as inadequate during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring systemic gaps in institutional responsiveness (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). These findings suggest that support mechanisms must not only exist but also be contextually appropriate, accessible, and sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity to effectively enhance student adjustment.

Coping Strategies Adopted by International Students

International students employ a range of strategies to navigate academic and cultural challenges. For example, a qualitative study of medical students in China found that those experiencing exam failure improved their performance through peer consultation, faculty guidance, enhanced study methods, language development, and time management strategies (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Similarly, longitudinal research indicates that non-Asian students are more likely than their Asian peers to engage in problem-focused coping strategies, positively influencing cross-cultural adaptation and academic success (Yan & Berliner, 2011). These findings highlight the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures, suggesting that proactive coping behaviours can be reinforced through responsive and inclusive university support.

Academic Integration and Student Engagement

Academic integration, encompassing students' sense of belonging, engagement, and commitment to the host university, is central to persistence and success (Tinto, 1993). When international students perceive exclusion from classroom participation, limited faculty support, or inadequate peer interaction, their academic belonging and motivation can be undermined, negatively affecting performance. Empirical studies within Chinese higher education contexts reinforce this link: Zhu et al. (2023) found that academic adaptation, including learning, communication, and self-regulation, was closely associated with overall integration, while Zhang and Zhou (2022) demonstrated that supportive peer networks and faculty encouragement enhance both academic and sociocultural adjustment. Collectively, these findings suggest that academic integration is not merely an outcome of student effort but a relational process shaped by institutional practices and social support.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Overall, the literature indicates that international students in China face multifaceted challenges, linguistic, cultural, institutional, and psychological, that influence academic outcomes and well-being. While prior studies have examined individual challenges and coping strategies, there is limited research exploring how these factors interact to shape academic integration within specific institutional contexts such as NENU. Moreover, most studies focus on generalized experiences across China rather than context-specific analyses that account for institutional support structures and students' adaptive strategies. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining international students' academic challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of university support at Northeast Normal University, thereby contributing nuanced insights to the discourse on international education in non-Western contexts.

Theoretical aspect

The study uses Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) to examine how international students adapt to the academic environment at Northeast Normal University (NENU). The theory conceptualises transitions as both external events and internal shifts in identity, roles, relationships, and routines. Its four S's "situation, Self, Support, and Strategies" provide a lens to understand how students navigate these changes. Situation refers to the context and challenges of the transition, such as adjusting to a new academic calendar or teaching style. Self encompasses individual characteristics like resilience and cultural identity. Support considers the availability and quality of university and social resources, which can facilitate or hinder adaptation (Zhao & Wen, 2022; Jianga, Yuen, & Horta, 2023). Strategies involve coping mechanisms, both problem-focused and emotion-focused, which influence academic adjustment and success (English & Chi, 2020).

While the framework is robust, it has limitations: it originates from Western contexts and may not fully capture culturally specific experiences of international students in China. Empirical applications in non-Western higher education remain limited (Zhang & Zhou, 2022; Zhu, wang & Zhang, 2023). Nevertheless, the 4S's framework guides the development of research questions, data collection, and interpretation, enabling an integrated analysis of personal, coping, and university factors shaping students' academic transition at NENU.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of international students at Northeast Normal University (NENU). A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study because it aims to understand how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences, particularly in adapting to new academic environments (Creswell, 2013). The focus is on understanding the nature and essence of academic challenges, coping mechanisms, and support system perceptions through the voices of those who experience them first-hand.

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at Northeast Normal University, a leading university in China that hosts a diverse population of international students from across South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. The target population included international master's students who studied at the University for at least one academic year. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research problem. Ten participants were selected. These participants were chosen based on their diverse academic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and willingness to share detailed accounts of their academic journeys.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing for open-ended responses and follow-up questions to clarify meanings and gather deeper insights. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in English. The interview protocol was designed around the study's three main research questions, covering themes such as Linguistic and Cognitive Barriers, adaptation strategies. University support services and emotional responses to academic transitions. All interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent), transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy to ensure the reliability of the data.

Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually, and subthemes and key themes were identified based on the four dimensions of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies). This theoretical lens provided a structured way to interpret the students' narratives and understand how different factors influenced their academic adaptation.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement and participant validation (member checking). Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of participant backgrounds and study context. Dependability was achieved by maintaining detailed documentation of the research process, and confirmability was ensured by keeping a researcher's journal to minimise bias. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants provided informed consent before participating. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and pseudonyms were used where needed.

IV. FINDINGS

This study explored international students' perspectives on academic challenges at NENU, focusing on how they experienced, navigated, and responded to academic transitions. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), the findings capture participants in four thematic areas: Linguistic and Cognitive Barriers, coping and learning strategies, perceptions of university support systems, and emotional journeys of Academic transition.

Linguistic and Cognitive Barriers

All participants appreciated the academic opportunities at Northeast Normal University, but highlighted challenges that required adjustment. Participant A mentioned the language barrier as a primary concern, explaining, "*Sometimes I understand the concepts, but the way they are expressed in academic English is complicated. I have to read again and again before I fully get it.*" Similarly, Participant D reflected on managing academic workload and deadlines, "*Coping with deadlines due to overloaded tasks gives pressure sometimes. When I rush through my work, I make a lot of mistakes.*"

Other challenges included adapting to different teaching and assessment styles. Participant C stated, "*When I came to class, the way the professor delivers content is very different from back home. It took time to understand the strategies they use, especially for preparing proposals and term papers.*" Participant F also noted that cultural and practical adjustments, such as food and study environment, could influence concentration: "*Sometimes I am hungry or feel lonely, which affects my focus and academic performance in one way or another.*"

These reflections indicate that while students value the academic rigour at NENU, adjusting to new academic expectations, workloads, and language demands requires effort and resilience.

Coping and learning strategies

Students described various strategies to navigate academic challenges. Peer collaboration was important, as Participant B shared, "*I usually discuss assignments with my colleagues. When I don't understand, they explain, and it makes things clearer for me.*" Self-directed learning was also emphasised. Participant C explained, "*Most of the time I go online, watch videos, or read articles to understand what the teacher meant in class.*"

Time management and planning were critical. Participant E noted, “*You have to start working on things early. If you wait until the last minute, the workload becomes too much.*” Participant B highlighted seeking guidance from more experienced peers, “*I meet knowledgeable scholars who show me how to go about things because you cannot follow just anyone.*”

These strategies demonstrate students’ adaptation skills and proactive approaches to managing academic demands.

Perceptions of university support systems

Participants appreciated support from faculty and supervisors. Participant C declared, “*My supervisor always encourages me. He tells me to stay focused and gives feedback on my drafts, which really helps me so much.*”

However, students suggested opportunities for more structured support. Participant E observed, “*The orientation was good, but after that, I did not see much structured support for international students like workshops or training in academic writing.*” Participant C added, “*The library is good, but most online platforms are in Chinese, and sometimes I cannot access what I need.*”

A need for personalised guidance was also mentioned: “*Sometimes I go to the international office, but they just give general answers. I wish there were someone we could talk to regularly, like an academic counsellor.*” These insights indicate that while existing support services are appreciated, students see potential for more tailored and accessible resources to strengthen their academic experience.

Emotional Journeys of Academic Transition

Adjusting to a new academic and cultural environment had emotional dimensions. As participant C described moments of stress, “*sometimes I feel overwhelmed, like I don’t know if I can finish everything on time.*” Participant B added, “*It can be frustrating when you don’t understand quickly, and you feel like others are ahead of you.*”

Despite these challenges, participants reported growth and resilience. Participant D reflected, “*At first, I was struggling, but now I feel stronger. Every challenge I overcome makes me more confident.*” Participant E stated, “*Even when I miss home, I push myself because completing assignments and getting good feedback gives me a sense of achievement.*”

These reflections show that while International students face academic and emotional challenges, they develop confidence, perseverance, and problem-solving skills as part of their academic transition at Northeast Normal University.

Table: Summary of the Themes and subthemes from the findings

Main Themes	Subthemes(Emerging ideas from Participants)
1. Linguistic and cognitive barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Language difficulties in understanding academic language ✓ Heavy academic workload and tight deadlines ✓ Adjustment to new teaching and assessment styles ✓ Cultural and environmental factors affecting concentration (e.g., food, loneliness, study environment)
2. Coping and learning strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Peer collaboration and group discussions ✓ Self-directed learning through online resources ✓ Time management and early planning ✓ Seeking guidance from experienced or senior students
3. Perceptions of university support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Support from supervisors and faculty feedback ✓ Limited structured academic support after orientation ✓ Language and accessibility issues with online and library platforms ✓ Need for personalized academic counselling or mentorship
4. Emotional journeys of academic Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Experiences of stress, frustration, and self-doubt ✓ Feelings of isolation and homesickness ✓ Emotional resilience and personal growth ✓ Increased confidence and academic self-efficacy through overcoming challenges

V. DISCUSSION

Linguistic and Cognitive Barriers: Language and Communication

The study indicates that language remains a major challenge for international students at Northeast Normal University (NENU). Although English is the medium of instruction, participants reported difficulties navigating administrative communication, using the digital learning platform, and engaging in daily interactions with local students. These experiences align with prior research demonstrating that linguistic barriers can impede academic engagement, even when courses are delivered in a second language (Yu & Wright, 2016; Zhang & Mi, 2019).

Additionally, while participants appreciated the quality of classroom instruction, interactions conducted in Mandarin added significant complexity to their university experience. This resonates with Sawir et al. (2008), who emphasize that language accessibility must extend beyond formal classroom settings to facilitate meaningful academic and social integration. Addressing these challenges may require targeted interventions such as discipline-specific language workshops and practical training for everyday communication, enabling students to participate confidently in both academic and social contexts.

Adaptation to Academic Culture

Participants also experienced difficulties adapting to NENU's academic culture, noting differences in classroom interaction, teaching approaches, and assessment expectations. They described the learning environment as more formal and structured than the interactive pedagogies familiar from their home countries. These observations are consistent with prior studies, which suggest that international students often struggle to navigate implicit academic norms and expectations in host institutions (Andrade, 2006; Marginson, 2014).

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated adaptability by observing peers, consulting senior students, and engaging with approachable faculty members. These strategies suggest that international students actively negotiate academic expectations rather than passively adjusting, highlighting the complementary roles of institutional support and student agency in promoting effective adaptation.

Coping Mechanisms and Student Agency

To manage academic stress, international students employed proactive strategies, including structured planning, collaborative learning, and the use of online instructional resources. Such behaviors illustrate "adaptive resilience," in which students leverage both personal and communal resources to navigate complex academic environments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

The reliance on peer networks and self-directed learning underscores the importance of student agency in academic success. This perspective aligns with research highlighting that international students are not merely recipients of support but active contributors to their educational outcomes (Glass et al., 2015). Universities can enhance these strategies by facilitating peer-led study groups, mentorship programs, and broader access to digital learning tools, thereby strengthening students' capacity for self-directed adaptation.

Perceptions of University Support Systems

Participants generally appreciated NENU's orientation programs, faculty accessibility, the International Student Office (ISO), and cultural activities. However, they noted that support services were sometimes generic and insufficiently tailored to individual needs. This aligns with previous findings that one-size-fits-all approaches often fail to address the diverse academic and psychosocial needs of international students (Glass et al., 2015).

Students recommended improvements such as discipline-specific language training, individualized academic counseling, and proactive mentorship initiatives. These suggestions highlight the importance of culturally responsive and targeted support systems that address both academic and psychosocial needs, ultimately enhancing engagement, reducing stress, and facilitating smoother integration into the university environment.

Recommendation

The study revealed that language barriers, particularly beyond the classroom, continue to impede international students' academic integration at Northeast Normal University (NENU). Although many participants appreciated the academic

opportunities available, they found academic English and practical Chinese difficult to master. To mitigate this challenge, NENU should expand its language support programs to include more practical and interactive learning approaches. These could focus on daily communication, academic vocabulary, and discipline-specific terminology. In addition, conversational practice sessions, workshops on navigating local systems such as transportation, banking, and shopping, as well as peer mentoring in language learning, would help reduce frustration and foster a stronger sense of engagement among international students (Yu & Wright, 2016; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

International students also reported difficulties adapting to different teaching approaches and assessment styles, which suggests a need for a stronger academic orientation and cultural integration strategy. NENU should consider providing more structured orientation programs that explicitly address academic expectations, classroom participation norms, and research practices. Such programs would help students understand local pedagogical methods and academic integrity standards. Moreover, offering intercultural communication training for both faculty and students would promote understanding and inclusivity within the learning environment, easing both academic and social transitions for international learners (Andrade, 2006; Marginson, 2014).

While existing academic support services at NENU are appreciated, participants felt that these services were often generic and not sufficiently personalized. Establishing dedicated academic counsellors or peer mentors for international students could help bridge this gap. These support systems should be proactive, culturally sensitive, and easily accessible, including discipline-specific guidance, one-on-one consultations, and online learning resources. By implementing tailored and student-centred academic support, NENU would create a more responsive educational environment that meets the diverse needs of its international student body (Sawir et al., 2008; Glass et al., 2015).

The findings also highlight the importance of peer collaboration and community building in supporting international students' academic and emotional adjustment. Many participants relied on peers for advice, motivation, and clarification of difficult concepts. Therefore, NENU could formalize peer-assisted learning schemes, group study sessions, and intercultural exchange programs to encourage collaboration and mutual learning. Such initiatives not only enhance academic performance but also strengthen students' sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and resilience throughout their studies (Tran, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Finally, the university should adopt a feedback-driven approach to ensure the continuous improvement of its policies and support programs. Actively seeking and incorporating international students' feedback on academic challenges and university services would make interventions more relevant and effective. Engaging students in the co-design of academic support mechanisms can further empower them and foster a sense of ownership in their academic journey. This participatory approach to policy development would also enhance institutional accountability and align NENU with international best practices in higher education management (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

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VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined international students' perspectives on academic challenges at NENU, revealing that language barriers, differing academic expectations, and cultural differences in teaching and learning remain significant obstacles to full integration. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability through strategies such as peer collaboration, self-directed learning, time management, and effective planning. While NENU provides valuable support services, including academic workshops and counselling, some students perceive them as too general or not sufficiently tailored to address the specific needs of international students. Enhancing language assistance programs, offering culturally sensitive counselling, implementing structured orientation sessions, and actively involving students in

the design of support services would further promote inclusivity, academic success, and a sense of belonging. Overall, NENU deserves recognition for its dedication to diversity, academic excellence, and internationalization; its ongoing efforts position it as a leading university committed to empowering students from diverse backgrounds to achieve their fullest potential and succeed academically and personally.

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