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## Global Perspectives, Local Impact: Chinese Students' Role in Global Higher Education

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted role of Chinese international students in the global higher education landscape from the unique perspective of policymakers. As the first comprehensive post-pandemic qualitative study of its kind, it provides insights through interviews with policymakers and admission officers across 11 countries on four continents. Research reveals that while Chinese students are consistently perceived as significant contributors across economic, cultural, and academic domains, their integration is accompanied by inherent complexities and challenges. The findings highlight how countries are adapting their educational policies to navigate both the substantial impacts and the diverse difficulties faced by these students, underscoring the critical need for adaptive, inclusive, and responsive policies in the evolving post-pandemic era.*

**Keywords:** Chinese students, transnational education, globalization, higher education, policymaker perspective

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted international education, particularly the mobility of Chinese international students, who constitute one of the largest student cohorts globally (Mok et al., 2021; Pan, 2021). This disruption led to a sharp decline in Chinese student enrollment in traditional destinations, prompting universities and policymakers to reevaluate their strategies (Institute of International Education, 2020).

While previous studies have examined the pandemic's impact on Chinese international students, most have focused on students' experiences (e.g., Alam et al., 2021; Duanaeva et al., 2023; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Zang et al., 2022). However, few studies have explored the unique perspectives of policymakers regarding the significance of these students and their responses to the evolving landscape of Chinese student mobility, encompassing both their contributions and multifaceted challenges. This research fills this crucial gap by exploring policy responses and attitudes within the context of globalization and higher education, emphasizing the need for adaptive and responsive strategies in the post-pandemic era.

This study offers several innovations: it employs a comparative methodology across 11 countries on four continents, providing insights into diverse decision-making processes (Guo et al., 2022); specifically, it focuses on policymakers' and admission officers' perspectives on Chinese students' economic, cultural, and academic impacts; and it utilizes post-COVID-19 data to analyze policy adaptations to global emergencies (Lawrence & Wu, 2021).

Preliminary findings indicate that policymakers recognize the significant role of Chinese international students across economic, cultural, and academic spheres and acknowledge their substantial contributions. However, perceptions and policies vary significantly across countries, underscoring the complexity of international education policies and the unique challenges and opportunities that Chinese students present in a globalized context.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Contextualizing Chinese International Student Mobility**

This literature review examines the evolving body of scholarship on the pivotal role of Chinese international students in the global higher education landscape. As the world's largest cohort of international students, they exert an undeniable influence on host nations—economically, culturally, and academically (Mok et al., 2021; Pan, 2021). Moving beyond a simple overview, this review critically assesses key trends, theoretical frameworks, and existing research limitations, thereby contextualizing the present study's unique exploration of both the opportunities and multifaceted challenges from the distinct perspective of policymakers.

### ***Shifting Narratives and the Evolving Global Higher Education Landscape***

Early scholarship frequently highlighted the economic benefits of Chinese students, often portraying them as "irresistible forces" or "money trees" (Cantwell, 2015). Such narratives, however, have been critiqued "overly one-sided" (Cantwell, 2015), failing to offer a critical analysis of the inherent challenges. This review, therefore, aims to present a more nuanced and balanced perspective. The dynamism of the global landscape is further evidenced by a decline in Chinese student numbers in traditional destinations (e.g., the U.S., Australia, UK) alongside growth in emerging destinations (e.g., Japan, Malaysia, Hong Kong) (Sunrise International, 2025). This evolving mobility, shaped by shifting destination preferences, complex geopolitical dynamics, and responsive policy changes (AACSB, 2025; Sunrise International, 2025), underscores the imperative for adaptive policymaker strategies.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Globalization and Higher Education**

Globalization profoundly shapes the landscape of higher education and student mobility. Foundational theories by Geerlings and Lundberg (2018), Koirala-Azad and Blundell (2011), Lemoine et al. (2017), Haider and Dilshad (2015), and Marginson and Sawir (2005) offer frameworks for understanding power dynamics, global forces, institutional adaptation, and global flows. More recently, Rakhimbekova et al. (2022) linked global trends with national policy responses, directly informing this study's focus on the policymaker perspective.

However, many of these theories, developed prior to significant geopolitical shifts and global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may not fully account for rapid changes, protectionist policies, or the increasing politicization of international education. These frameworks often address macro-level "state policies" without detailing policymakers' granular decisions. The present study directly addresses this gap by focusing on policymakers' perspectives, exploring their adaptive strategies in response to both perceived benefits and documented challenges, thereby making a novel contribution to the field and acknowledging that globalization in higher education is a complex process often influenced by political tensions and economic considerations.

### **Chinese International Students: Motivations, Contributions, and Evolving Experiences**

Chinese students pursue overseas education for multiple reasons, including academic quality, enhanced career prospects, and personal development (Wu, 2014; Ke & Berliner, 2010; Zhai et al., 2019). They make substantial contributions to host countries across economic (e.g., tuition fees, consumption), cultural (e.g., fostering cultural exchange), and academic domains (e.g., contributing to discourse and research) (Hong et al., 2020; Merola et al., 2019).

However, the adaptation and integration experiences of Chinese students are diverse, marked by both successes and considerable difficulties. These challenges

include navigating cultural differences (Tian et al., 2021), confronting social integration issues (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), and managing complex psychological and emotional experiences in new cultural settings (Huang et al., 2022; Li, 2017). Despite the extensive literature on these aspects, systematic research from the policymaker perspective remains limited. Recent research has also explored the complexity of Chinese students' decision-making within global higher education. Wu (2025) revealed that Chinese students' college choice processes are simultaneously privileged and constrained by institutional hierarchies and global inequalities, showing how national policies and perceived institutional reputation jointly shape student mobility trends.

A critical gap persists between policymakers' often positive perceptions of student contributions and the significant, frequently encountered challenges reported by students themselves (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). This study endeavors to bridge this crucial gap, particularly in light of recent global crises and geopolitical shifts.

### **Challenges and Complexities Faced by Chinese International Students**

Chinese international students navigate a landscape of multifaceted and often interconnected challenges that profoundly impact their academic, sociocultural, psychological, and overall well-being. Prominent academic barriers include language proficiency, particularly in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments (Auschner & Jiang, 2025; Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025), as well as dissatisfaction with online learning and technical difficulties exacerbated by the pandemic (Zang et al., 2022). Sociocultural integration also presents a complex domain, where cultural and religious differences can lead to feelings of isolation (Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025), and Chinese students frequently navigate conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures (Yang & Du, 2025), often resulting in experiences of loneliness and social isolation (Duanaeva et al., 2023). Similarly, Auschner and Jiang (2025) reported that Chinese students at German technical universities often face persistent language and trust barriers, indicating that institutional support remains insufficient in addressing their specific needs.

Furthermore, mental health concerns are increasingly prevalent, with many experiencing psychological distress, stress, and anxiety (Alam et al., 2021; Duanaeva et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated psychological impacts through experiences of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia (Rickert, 2025; Rodriguez et al., 2025), with institutions sometimes perceived as providing inadequate support for these challenges (Rickert, 2025).

**Table 1 The key challenges faced by Chinese international students**

<b>Challenge Category</b>	<b>Specific Issues</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>
Academic Adaptation	Language barriers, unique linguistic hurdles in EMI settings, online dissatisfaction, technical difficulties	(Auschner&Jiang, 2025; Xue&Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025; Zang et al., 2022)
Sociocultural Integration	Cultural and religious differences, social integration difficulties, cultural identity conflicts, loneliness, social isolation	(Xue &Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025; Yang&Du, 2025; Spencer-Oatey et al, 2017; Duanaeva et al., 2023)
Psychological Well-being	Psychological distress, stress, anxiety, anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, mask-wearing anxiety	(Alam et al., 2021; Duanaeva et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Rickert, 2025; Rodriguez et al., 2025; Ma&Zhan, 2020; Hsieh&Watson, 2025)
Policy &Economic	Visa and immigration policy uncertainty, restrictive visa policies, political climate concerns, post-graduation employment, ROI pressure, economic instability, financial difficulties, housing crises, student visa caps	(AACSB, 2025; Sunrise International, 2025; Rickert, 2025)
Institutional Support	Perceived neglect by institutions, lack of culturally and linguistically sensitive support, feeling misunderstood	(Rickert,2025)

External policy and economic factors also pose significant challenges, encompassing visa and immigration policy uncertainties (e.g., the U.S. "Proclamation 10043," Sunrise International, 2025), restrictive policies in major destination countries (AACSB, 2025; Sunrise International, 2025), and student visa caps implemented due to issues such as housing shortages (Sunrise International, 2025). Concerns about the broader political climate and mounting pressure regarding the return on tuition investment further contribute to students' financial insecurity (Sunrise International, 2025). These interconnected challenges, often catalyzed by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the imperative for adaptive policymaker strategies. Complementing these findings, Xue and Mehar Singh (2025) conducted a systematic review summarizing the academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation barriers faced by Chinese students across multiple host countries. Their study underscores persistent issues such as linguistic challenges, limited institutional trust, and cultural dissonance, which further reinforce the need for responsive policymaking.

### **Shifting the Landscape of International Education: Geopolitics, Policy, and Post-Pandemic Realities**

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected international students, shifting their academic and personal lives. It accelerated online education (Demuyakor, 2020; Boström et al., 2021; Zang et al., 2022) and introduced issues such as visa policy changes (Park & Shimada, 2022), professional identity development (Luo & Mao, 2022), and psychological effects (Alam et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Challenges in social adaptation, stress, and resilience (Duanaeva et al., 2023), along with impacts on research productivity (Rana et al., 2022), were noted. Government policies play a critical role (Qi & Ma, 2021), and Chinese students cope with stigma and adapt to online learning (Ma & Zhan, 2020; Zang et al., 2022). The pandemic served as a catalyst, exposing vulnerabilities and trends in international education.

Beyond the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and national policies significantly influenced Chinese student mobility. Chinese student numbers in the U.S. declined by more than 25% by 2023--2024, with India becoming the largest source (Sunrise International, 2025). The U.S. "Proclamation 10043" cancelled over 1,000 student visas (Sunrise International, 2025). Reports from AACSB (2025) and Sunrise International (2025) detail "significant policy barriers" and "visa and immigration policy uncertainty" in major destinations. Canada and Australia introduced student visa caps due to housing shortages (Sunrise International, 2025). These "changing geopolitical dynamics" (IAUP, 2025) are shifting Chinese student mobility toward new destinations such as Hong Kong (Times of India, 2025) and Chinese domestic universities (Sunrise International, 2025). This signals a fundamental shift, where political stability and immigration pathways are as crucial as academic quality. In parallel, Li, Zong, and Zhang (2025) identified how policy incentives, language accessibility, and economic partnerships—particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative—drive inbound

international student flows to China. Their empirical findings reflect how national strategies can reshape the geography of student mobility.

### **Identifying Research Gaps and Justifying the Present Study's Contribution**

The literature extensively examines the motivations, contributions, and challenges of Chinese international students, as well as the impacts of globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. This provides a solid foundation for understanding their multifaceted role in international education.

Despite this, a significant gap remains in understanding these phenomena from the unique perspective of policymakers and admissions officers. While student experiences are well documented, institutional and governmental responses, strategic adaptations, and policymakers' perceptions of the importance of Chinese students remain underexplored. The potential "perception-reality" disconnect—where policymakers perceive positive contributions while students face significant challenges—is a critical area that existing research has not adequately bridged.

The present study addresses this gap by focusing on the policymaker perspective, offering insights into how these key stakeholders perceive Chinese students' economic, cultural, and academic roles and how they respond to a dynamic global landscape of opportunities and challenges. By examining policymakers' strategic considerations and policy adaptations, this research offers a crucial perspective for developing effective, adaptive, and inclusive policies. This focus on policymakers' adaptive strategies in response to both perceived benefits and documented challenges represents a significant innovation, moving beyond descriptive accounts to a nuanced analysis of strategic decision-making at the governmental and institutional levels.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Our qualitative inquiry is grounded in the globalization and higher education paradigm, which is pivotal for dissecting the nuanced interplay between global educational trends and Chinese international students' experiences. Education plays a crucial role in economic, social, and cultural development (Monteiro et al., 2021), and this study specifically examines how Chinese student mobility contributes to a globalized economic landscape, enriches cultural milieus, and impacts academic discourse and collaboration in host countries. These economic, cultural, and academic aspects form the core focus of this research.

### **Methodological Approach**

This study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically thematic analysis, to explore the multifaceted experiences and perspectives of policymakers and academic administrators concerning Chinese international students. Owing to its flexibility and rigor in identifying and analyzing patterns

within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012), thematic analysis provides in-depth insights into key stakeholders' perceptions. This research is best characterized as a multisite qualitative study, aiming to identify overarching themes across diverse contexts rather than conducting an intensive, holistic analysis of a single entity.

### **Research Question**

Based on the research background and theoretical framework, the central research question of our study is as follows: "From the perspective of policymakers, what is the significance of Chinese international students for their respective countries or educational institutions?"

### **Data Description**

Data for this study were collected through semistructured interviews conducted at the 23rd China Annual Conference & Expo for International Education (CACIE), held in February 2023 in Beijing and October 2023 in Shanghai. This event provided a strategic opportunity to access diverse groups of international education stakeholders, including university admission officers and government policy representatives, from various countries.

**Participants:** A total of 21 effective interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 countries, representing 28 schools and organizations. The participants included both university-level admissions officers (from public and private institutions) and government-level policy representatives (from government agencies). The distinction between these roles was maintained during data collection and analysis to understand potential variations in perspectives. The interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews were primarily conducted in Chinese, and relevant excerpts were translated into English for analysis. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the interviewees' characteristics.

**Sampling:** A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possessed direct experience and insights into the policies and practices concerning Chinese international students. This nonprobability sampling method allowed for the deliberate selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research question. While this approach ensures depth of insight from key stakeholders, it acknowledges that the findings are specific to the perspectives gathered at this event and may not be universally generalizable to all policymakers globally. Four interviews were ineffective, and three were refused; these interviews were excluded from the final dataset.

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**Data Analysis Methods**


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**Table 2. Interviewee characteristics**

ID	Country	Institution	Others
1	USA	B	Cultural Exportation
2	USA	B	Multicultural Diversity
3	USA	B	Located in California
4	Canada	A	Vocational Education
5	Canada	A	Vocational Education
6	Canada	C	Immigration Advantages
7	Canada	A	Multicultural Exchanges
8	Canada	B	Diversity and Inclusivity
9	Canada	C	Mutually Beneficial
10	Canada	A	New Oriental
11	Germany	C	Global Educational Equity
12	France	A	Global Educational Equity
13	UK	A	Diversity and Equalization
14	UK	A	Business Collaboration Program with China
15	UK	A	Collaboration Program with China
16	Australia	A	Ranking Advantage
17	New Zealand	A	Educational Equity
18	New Zealand	A	Educational Equity
19	New Zealand	A	Educational Equity
20	New Zealand	A	Educational Equity
21	Malaysia	C	Comprehensive Education System

A: Public Institution B: Private Institution C: Governmental Organization

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The transcribed interview data were subjected to a systematic thematic analysis following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), adapted for this study:

*Familiarization:* Researchers immerse themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and identify initial patterns.

*Initial Coding:* Relevant segments of the text were systematically coded. Codes were generated both descriptively (capturing the literal content) and interpretively (noting underlying meanings and concepts related to economic, cultural, and academic contributions, as well as challenges). This iterative process involves marking keywords and phrases.

*Searching for Themes:* Initial codes were then collated and grouped into potential themes based on their conceptual connections and recurring patterns across the dataset.

*Reviewing Themes:* The preliminary themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure that they accurately represented the data and were coherent. This involved refining, combining, or splitting themes as necessary.

*Defining and Naming Themes:* Each theme was clearly defined, and its essence was articulated. Overarching themes and subthemes were established, and concise descriptive names were assigned to each.

*Producing the Report:* The final themes were used to structure the findings section, which was supported by illustrative quotes from the participants.

The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to organize, code, and manage the large volume of interview data, thereby facilitating the systematic application of thematic analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Economic Impacts**

From an economic perspective, participants consistently reported that Chinese international students play a crucial role in promoting local economic development across various countries and institutions. The respondents indicated that these students contribute to local consumption, stimulate employment, and serve as a bridge for communication and cooperation between local and Chinese economies.

#### ***Increasing School Revenue and Stimulating Domestic Consumption***

The data indicate that the influx of Chinese international students has significantly propelled the domestic economies of several nations. A key aspect of this impact, as participants frequently highlighted, lies in the tuition fees paid by Chinese students, which substantially contribute to the revenue of educational institutions. One Canadian participant remarked, "As we all know, prior to the pandemic, Chinese students were considered a 'money tree' in Canada's education market. It is widely recognized that the tuition fees paid by international students constitute a significant portion of the revenue for educational institutions, and among all international students, Chinese students constitute the highest proportion..." (Canada).

Furthermore, several respondents expressed the view that Chinese international students possess robust purchasing power, which notably stimulates domestic consumption. A Malaysian respondent indicated that "At the same time, the influx of Chinese students into Malaysia has led to a deeper understanding of Malaysia by China, thereby promoting the sales of Malaysian products in China" (Malaysia).

## **Impact of Immigration**

For countries where immigration is a primary focus, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, participants suggested that Chinese international students constitute a significant pool of potential immigrants. As one Canadian participant explained, "Owing to Canada being an immigrant-receiving country, many Chinese international students, including those in Manitoba, who come to Canada may have a plan to seek employment and immigrate as soon as possible. Therefore, Canada, including Manitoba, has implemented policies that facilitate postgraduation employment and immigration processes for international students" (Canada). Similarly, a New Zealand participant suggested that "New Zealand's appeal to Chinese international students may lie in its immigration policy. As an immigrant-receiving country, New Zealand is open, welcoming to diversity, and in need of immigrants. Within New Zealand's immigrant population, a proportion comprises skilled individuals. Therefore, those intending to immigrate to New Zealand must first pursue studies there. After graduation, they are granted a three-year work visa, during which, if they secure employment, they become eligible and may have the opportunity to apply for permanent residency in the future" (New Zealand). Similarly, Huang (2025) emphasized that language environments and education policy frameworks play decisive roles in shaping international students' postgraduate retention intentions. Host countries with flexible visa pathways and inclusive linguistic policies are more likely to retain Chinese graduates as part of their skilled labor force.

## ***Promoting Local Employment***

Respondents from the United States, Canada, and other countries expressed the view that the arrival of Chinese international students has also contributed to addressing their domestic employment concerns. These students, participants noted, often bring diverse skill sets, cultural perspectives, and strong work ethic to their host countries, making them highly sought after by employers. Their presence reportedly not only enriches the academic environment but also helps fill gaps in the labor market, particularly in fields where there may be shortages of skilled workers. Additionally, several participants indicated that many Chinese international students choose to remain in their host countries after completing their studies, further bolstering the local workforce and contributing to economic growth and innovation. A U.S. participant reported that "For students, academic exchanges and employment opportunities are actually quite favorable, and for companies, Chinese graduates have demonstrated outstanding performance in various aspects" (United States). A Canadian respondent noted, "Speaking from a local perspective in Canada, since around the mid-2021, there has been a change in the overall employment rate and unemployment rate. Some international students from the local area have already gone there, and we have provided assistance and conducted research. At that time, those students successfully found jobs, and our economy has gradually recovered, with a gradual decrease in the unemployment rate" (Canada). Furthermore, a Canadian participant shared that

"Our main focus is to have students participate in practical experiences during their studies. As a result, local employers have provided feedback that our graduates are exceptionally outstanding and perform remarkably well in their work" (Canada).

### ***Promotion of Diplomatic Relations and Substantive Regional Cooperation***

Participants from several countries indicated that Chinese international students have established cooperative bridges between nations. In recent years, respondents have suggested that Chinese students play an increasingly significant role in international collaboration. One participant from the United Kingdom, reflecting on their own experience, stated, "First, I am an international student myself, and I have experienced studying, working, and then returning to my home country. I have gone through this process for over a decade. From the perspective of the United Kingdom, Chinese international students have played a crucial role in promoting diplomatic relations and fostering practical regional cooperation" (The United Kingdom). A Malaysian respondent described how "Currently, Chinese international students have also served as a 'bridge' and become a 'channel' for official and nonofficial communication" (Malaysia).

In summary, participants' accounts suggest that Chinese international students' economic impacts are substantial and vary significantly across different countries. In Canada and the United States, these students reportedly boost local economies through their spending and play a crucial role in job creation. In New Zealand, their economic input primarily manifests in considerable tuition revenue, which is vital for the financial health of educational institutions. Australia, according to participants, has had a significant effect on immigration and economic dynamism. The participants of the United Kingdom benefitted from the promotion of diplomatic relations and regional cooperation, highlighting the role of students in international economic exchanges. Overall, this analysis underscores the indispensable economic role that Chinese students are perceived to play in the interconnected global educational landscape.

### **Cultural impacts**

The participants generally reported that Chinese students play a vital role in the development of multiculturalism and cultural dissemination, becoming a significant component of the international student population in many countries. Moreover, the respondents indicated that Chinese students are recognized for their significant contributions to promoting academic exchanges and collaborations among nations.

### ***Internationalization Development***

The respondents indicated that Chinese international students constitute a major part of the international student population in numerous countries, which holds significant importance for enhancing the internationalization development

of educational institutions. A German participant emphasized that "Chinese international students play a crucial role in Germany because they constitute the largest group among international students. Many students choose to study in Germany, making them an integral part of the international student community" (Germany). A UK participant noted, "In our school, we have a significant number of Chinese students, who make substantial contributions to our institution. Especially in recent years, China has consistently been among the top five countries in terms of student enrollment, surpassing even countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom" (UK). A Malaysian respondent stated that "Currently, Chinese international students constitute the major portion of Malaysia's international student community" (Malaysia).

### ***Multiculturalism and Diversity***

Most participants expressed the view that Chinese international students have facilitated the development of multiculturalism and the diversification of educational institutions. A U.S. participant explained that "In reality, one of the main objectives of U.S. universities in admitting international students is to foster diversity in the campus cultural environment. Our university hopes to avoid an overrepresentation of students from any specific country. Therefore, a relatively equal distribution of students from various countries is preferred, with a larger number of countries providing the student..." (US). Another U.S. participant added that "Many official websites of American universities boast about having students from 150 countries. They take pride in the greater number of countries represented but not necessarily in the total student count. What they value more is having students from diverse backgrounds enriching their campus culture, and Chinese students are the main part of it..." (US). Recent studies have further demonstrated that sociocultural adaptation is a dynamic and reciprocal process. Xiaofang et al. (2025) reported that peer interaction, institutional inclusivity, and self-efficacy significantly influence Chinese international students' adaptation trajectories, suggesting that localized support systems can foster deeper intercultural understanding.

The participants described a vibrant multicultural learning environment, fostering rich exchanges of diverse perspectives and insights. This dynamic atmosphere, they suggested, not only enhances understanding but also promotes empathy and appreciation for different cultures and viewpoints among students. A UK participant described how "Chinese students are now also assigned to different departments within our university, creating a diverse learning environment. In some departments, teachers may notice the presence of only one Chinese student during class. Therefore, for certain departments, such as the Department of Political Science, the multicultural learning environment may not be strongly apparent during discussions. Therefore, now each department has a number of Chinese students, and the proportional representation of students from different countries contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of diverse policies and customs worldwide" (UK). A New Zealand participant highlighted

that "New Zealand is an immigrant-friendly country that welcomes diversity" (New Zealand).

### ***Dissemination of Chinese Culture***

Participants from several countries indicated that the arrival of Chinese international students has facilitated the dissemination of Chinese culture in the local context. A Canadian participant reflected that "I believe that Chinese students are gradually inclined toward understanding and integrating into the broader Canadian university, community, and country. This is a gradual process, especially for young people... Moreover, I think it is important for us as admissions officers to provide them with proper guidance so that they have realistic expectations and a better understanding of their prospective schools, communities, cities, and countries, allowing for smoother adaptation. Personally, as an international student in Toronto, I consider Toronto my second home and feel a sense of belonging" (Canada). This perspective suggests that while cultural exchange is valued, the integration process is recognized as requiring support and guidance from institutions. Another Canadian participant suggested that "I believe that Chinese students can bring Chinese culture to a wider audience, allowing others to have a better understanding of China and serve as a bridge for cultural exchange. Chinese students engage in more interactions within the school, including academic and cultural exchanges" (Canada).

In recent years, participants noted that officials in many countries have celebrated traditional Chinese festivals and established dedicated Chinese cultural centers. A UK participant provided an example, stating that "Chinese international students have certainly contributed to cultural dissemination. For example, in Belfast, there is a Chinese consulate and a Chinatown. During certain Chinese festivals, they also celebrate and decorate the streets and alleys to coincide with these occasions" (UK). A Malaysian respondent further elaborated that "Chinese international students constitute the major composition of Malaysia's current international student body, enriching cultural exchanges between Malaysia and China. Malaysia currently has a Chinese population of approximately 25%, with nearly 6–7 million Chinese people among its population of over 30 million. The influx of Chinese students provides a channel for cultural exchange between Malaysia and China, while also spreading Chinese culture in Malaysia" (Malaysia).

Overall, the participants' accounts suggest that Chinese international students play an extensive role in enriching the cultural environment of their host countries. In Germany, the UK, the U.S., and Malaysia, these students significantly contribute to cultural diversity on campuses, fostering a deeper understanding and exchange of various cultural perspectives. They are perceived as integral in promoting multiculturalism and internationalization within educational settings. Additionally, the participants indicated that Chinese students play a pivotal role in introducing and assimilating aspects of their own culture, thereby enhancing the multicultural tapestry of their host communities while also highlighting the recognized need for support in their integration journey.

## **Academic impacts**

The participants generally indicated that the academic contributions of Chinese international students are important for various countries. The respondents reported that these students demonstrate outstanding performance in academic endeavors, particularly in mathematics and electronics disciplines. Additionally, they are perceived to contribute by facilitating the collision of different academic and cultural backgrounds, resulting in innovative ideas and research. Moreover, participants suggested that they serve as bridges for communication, promoting academic exchange and collaboration between different countries and regions, thus contributing to the development of international academia.

### ***Outstanding Academic Performance***

The respondents reported that Chinese students are known for their diligence, excellent academic achievements, and well-rounded development, which is evident in their remarkable performance across various academic disciplines. A New Zealand participant, drawing on personal experience, reported that "I, myself, am an international student, and currently, as a member of the school administration, I believe that many Chinese students are quite outstanding at the grassroots level. Chinese students are perceived by many locals as hardworking and capable of enduring hardships, excelling in various aspects" (New Zealand). This participant also noted that "Chinese students also tend to achieve good GPAs in their academic disciplines" (New Zealand).

### ***Proficient in Mathematics and Electronic Engineering***

The participants indicated that Chinese international students have excelled in mathematics and have demonstrated outstanding performance in the field of electronics engineering. A New Zealand participant specifically highlighted that "Chinese students excel in the field of mathematics and are capable of achieving high academic credits" (New Zealand). A U.S. participant remarked that "In fact, Chinese students represent a formidable force, particularly in the field of electronics engineering, showcasing their remarkable abilities" (US).

Academic Exchange and Development (US, Canada, New Zealand)

The participants suggested that the academic background collisions brought by Chinese international students serve as an important force in promoting both domestic and international academic exchanges and development. These interactions, they noted, spark intellectual discourse and innovative thinking, enriching the academic environment for all students. A U.S. participant explained that "Through the collisions between different cultures or academic backgrounds, novel ideas can emerge. Such academic research or discussions can provide the greatest assistance to the university" (US). A Canadian participant described how "Chinese students actively engage in various forms of communication and academic and cultural exchanges within the university. For example, we organize

events, promote our activities in China, and facilitate the exchange of advice and experiences between senior and junior students, as well as between domestic and international students" (Canada).

#### Academic Collaboration (New Zealand)

With respect to academic collaboration, participants from some countries expressed their intention to establish collaborative projects or research centers specifically in China. A New Zealand participant provided an example of how "New Zealand has a 'Three Brothers' program with China, which involves a school from the developed eastern region of China, a comparatively less developed school from the western region, and a collaboration with a school in New Zealand. This represents a 'three brother' scenario. The project is supported jointly by the governments of both countries, reflecting the relationship at the central level between the two nations and serving as a notable example of educational cooperation between them" (New Zealand).

In summary, participants' accounts suggest that Chinese international students have a substantial academic impact across various countries, particularly in New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. These students are recognized for their diligence and high academic achievements, especially in mathematics and electronic engineering disciplines. Their presence in educational institutions fosters a dynamic academic environment through the collision of diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. This environment promotes innovative ideas and research, contributing significantly to the development of international academia. Additionally, the participants indicated that Chinese students are pivotal in enhancing both domestic and international academic exchanges and collaborations, exemplifying their integral role in global educational networks.

### **Acknowledged Complexities and Areas for Policy Adaptation**

While policymakers predominantly emphasized the significant positive impacts of Chinese international students, their insights also implicitly or explicitly highlighted various complexities and areas requiring strategic adaptation. These observations, although often framed in terms of ongoing efforts or future considerations, reveal an awareness of the challenges inherent in international student mobility and integration.

#### *Navigation Adaptation and Integration Processes*

The participants acknowledged that the integration of Chinese students into host university and community environments is a nuanced and ongoing process. For example, a Canadian participant noted the gradual nature of this integration, emphasizing the role of admissions officers in providing "proper guidance" and fostering "realistic expectations" to facilitate smoother adaptation (Canada). This perspective suggests that cultural and social transitions are not always seamless and require active institutional support to ensure students' well-being and sense of belonging. The emphasis on promoting "multiculturalism and diversification" (US, UK, New Zealand) also implicitly points to the complexities of managing

diverse student populations and ensuring equitable integration for all, as evidenced by the UK participant's description of strategically assigning Chinese students to various departments to foster a truly diverse learning environment (UK).

### ***Responding to Evolving Policy and Economic Landscapes***

Policymakers' discussions, particularly in the context of postpandemic recovery and shifting global dynamics, indicated an awareness of external pressures impacting student mobility. While not always framed as direct "challenges", their strategies and concerns reflected broader issues. For example, the emphasis on facilitating postgraduation employment and immigration pathways (Canada, New Zealand) suggests an understanding of students' evolving motivations beyond just academic pursuits, including concerns about return on investment for tuition and future career prospects. The need to adapt to changing global trends and geopolitical shifts, as highlighted in the broader context of the study, implies that policymakers are navigating an environment with inherent uncertainties and potential obstacles to student flow.

### ***Addressing Resources and Support Needs***

Although not explicitly detailed as "problems" in the provided quotes, the very existence of policies and initiatives aimed at supporting international students (e.g., providing guidance, fostering diversity, promoting academic exchange) implies an underlying recognition of needs that must be met. The discussion of the "multicultural learning environment" and "comprehensive understanding of diverse policies and customs" (UK) suggests that institutions are actively working to bridge gaps and address potential misunderstandings that can arise from cultural differences. Furthermore, the U.S. participants' desire to "avoid an overrepresentation of students from any specific country" (US) indicates a strategic consideration for managing student demographics, which can be a challenge in maintaining diverse goals.

In summary, while policymakers primarily articulated the positive impacts of Chinese international students, their responses also revealed an implicit understanding of the complexities involved in student adaptation, the dynamic nature of global policy and economic environments, and the ongoing need for institutional support and strategic management to ensure successful integration and sustained engagement. This nuanced perspective acknowledges that the benefits of international student mobility are intertwined with various challenges that require proactive and adaptive policy responses.

### ***Specific policy responses and adaptations***

In response to the evolving landscape and identified challenges, various countries and institutions have implemented or advocated for specific policies and initiatives aimed at supporting international students, particularly in the post-

pandemic era. These examples demonstrate concrete efforts by policymakers to adapt to new realities and address student needs.

### ***Visa and Immigration Policy Adjustments:***

Canada: Implementing temporary COVID-19 policies allowing international students to complete up to 100% of their studies online from outside Canada (March 2020--August 2022) without affecting their postgraduate work permit (PGWP) eligibility. They also temporarily lifted the 20-hour per week work restriction for students in essential services (April 2020) and provided extensions for documentation submission.

United States: Advocacy groups such as the NAFSA encouraged Congress to implement policies such as waiving in-person visa interview requirements, maintaining priority appointments for student visas, and protecting the immigration status of students taking online classes due to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> However, the Trump administration also implemented restrictive measures, including suspending routine visa services, cancelling appointments, and revoking some student visas.

Australia: After borders reopened, the Australian government tightened student visa processing standards, increased proof of savings requirements (to A\$30,000), raised English language requirements, increased visa application fees, and introduced a "Genuine Student Test." They also reintroduced a cap on work hours (48 hours per fortnight during teaching periods). However, they maintained increased approved international student work hours and improved poststudy work rights.

The United Kingdom: UKCISA, a charity, actively advocates for policy changes to ensure that the UK remains welcoming, including promoting eVisas to replace physical documents and supporting student employability.

### ***Financial and Housing Support:***

United Kingdom: UK universities worked to support students facing financial challenges, offering financial aid and enhanced mental health services. Governments in England, Wales, and Scotland made international students eligible for additional hardship funding during the pandemic. Many universities created new funds or expanded eligibility criteria for hardship support, with best practices including ensuring that all international students are eligible and considering remote support such as food vouchers.

Australia: While the Australian government did not provide direct financial support, universities such as UNSW raised philanthropic funds (\$1.85 million) for COVID-19 relief programs, provided funding relief and grants (\$5.9 million to 11,000 students) and distributed food hampers. UNSW also introduced an International Student Award (15% tuition for eligible countries in 2022–2023).

United States: Recommendations for supporting international students include providing financial aid to those excluded from federal aid and offering low-cost dorm housing at subsidized rates. U.S. institutions are also seeing a shift

in student housing preferences toward affordability and essential amenities over luxury.

***Mental health and well-being support:***

*United Kingdom:* Universities' enhanced mental health and well-being services.

*United States:* Recommendations include creating social support networks, establishing one-on-one advice, providing free remote mental health access, linking students with local hosts or peer mentors, and expanding visas to dispel confusion. Telehealth services are highlighted as a way to overcome the stigma of seeking mental health treatment. A mobile application prototype has been developed to combat mental health issues by facilitating peer support and increasing service awareness. *Australia:* Universities provided programs to support the welfare of international students educationally and socially, including mental health services.

***Academic Adaptation and Anti-Racism Initiatives:***

*Australia:* Universities rapidly transitioned to online education during the pandemic, with some creating remote lab solutions for online access to physical laboratories.

*United States:* Advocacy for antiracism pedagogy in social work education includes atoning for complicity in structural racism, centering BIPOC practitioners' models, building capacity for critical race praxis, and infusing antiracism pedagogy throughout the curriculum. Universities also promote mental health services and culturally relevant counseling services among international students.

These examples demonstrate that policymakers and institutions are actively engaged in developing and implementing strategies to address the complex challenges faced by international students, moving beyond a purely economic focus to encompass broader welfare and integration concerns.

To further illustrate the multifaceted nature of Chinese international students' experiences and the areas requiring policy attention, Table 3 summarizes key challenges identified in the broader literature, which policymakers implicitly or explicitly navigate.

**Table 3. Key challenges faced by Chinese international students**

<b>Impact Category</b>	<b>Key Aspects</b>	<b>Illustrative Examples from Findings</b>
<b>Economic</b>	Revenue generation, consumption stimulation, immigration pool, local employment, diplomatic bridges	Tuition fees as significant revenue (Canada); robust purchasing power (Malaysia); potential immigrants (Canada, New Zealand); filling labor market gaps (US, Canada); fostering diplomatic ties (UK, Malaysia)
<b>Cultural</b>	Internationalization, multiculturalism, cultural dissemination	Major portion of international student body (Germany, UK, Malaysia); fostering campus diversity (US, UK, New Zealand); spreading Chinese culture (Canada, UK, Malaysia)
<b>Academic</b>	Academic performance, specialized skills, academic exchange, research collaboration	High GPAs, diligence (New Zealand); proficiency in mathematics and electronic engineering (New Zealand, US); fostering innovative ideas through cultural/academic collisions (US, Canada); establishing joint research programs (New Zealand)

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the pivotal role of Chinese international students in the global higher education landscape, highlighting their economic, cultural, and academic contributions from a policymaker's perspective. While these students are consistently perceived as critical assets to host countries, necessitating targeted policies to maximize their positive impact, our findings also implicitly reveal the complexities and challenges inherent in their integration and the dynamic global environment.

**Engagement with Existing Literature and Unique Contributions**

The financial significance of Chinese international students cannot be overstated. Our findings, indicating that their tuition payments are a major revenue source for universities in countries such as Canada and the United States, directly confirm prior research by Cantwell (2015), who emphasized international students as vital financial resources for higher education institutions. This study, however, extends this understanding by detailing how policymakers strategically leverage these contributions, identifying specific mechanisms such as facilitating immigration pathways and stimulating local employment as key policy considerations—a perspective less explored in student-centric studies.

Culturally, Chinese students are instrumental in fostering multicultural campus environments, enriching campus life, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing global awareness among domestic students. This aligns with the work of Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017), who underscore the value of international students in creating diverse and inclusive academic settings. However, our findings, when juxtaposed with recent literature, refine this perspective by implicitly highlighting the complexities of cultural integration. While policymakers value the "presence" of Chinese students for diversity, studies by Auschner and Jiang (2025) and Yang and Du (2025) emphasize significant challenges in cultural adaptation, language barriers, and even experiences of discrimination and xenophobia (Rickert, 2025; Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025). This suggests that while their diversity is appreciated, their "integration process" and "encountered challenges" require more targeted policy attention than some policymakers might currently perceive.

Academically, Chinese students have made significant contributions, particularly in STEM fields, where their participation has been linked to advancements in research and innovation. This confirms the literature that highlights the importance of international students in enhancing research outputs and academic collaboration (Altbach & Knight, 2007). For example, in New Zealand, the presence of Chinese students in STEM fields has fostered international research partnerships, reinforcing the need for policies that facilitate these collaborations. This study extends this research by showing policymakers' active intent to establish collaborative projects and research centers in China, as exemplified by New Zealand's "Three Brothers" program, indicating a strategic, top-down approach to academic engagement.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its distinct policymaker perspective, which offers novel insights into how these key stakeholders perceive and respond to the multifaceted role of Chinese international students. By gathering insights from 11 countries across four continents in a postpandemic context, this research provides a comparative lens on institutional and governmental adaptations to evolving student mobility patterns. It moves beyond descriptive accounts of student experiences to analyze the strategic decision-making processes that shape international education policy, revealing how policymakers navigate both the significant contributions and the inherent complexities and challenges associated with this crucial demographic. This focus on adaptive strategies in a dynamic global environment represents a significant innovation in the field.

### **Policy implications and future research directions**

The study's findings suggest several critical policy implications that extend beyond merely maximizing benefits to actively addressing identified challenges.

Economically, while policies should continue to attract Chinese students for their financial contributions, they must also consider the evolving economic landscape. This includes mitigating overreliance on tuition fees by diversifying international student sources (AACSB, 2025; Sunrise International, 2025) and addressing potential pressures on local infrastructure, such as housing shortages,

which have led to student visa caps in countries such as Canada and Australia (Sunrise International, 2025). Sustainable economic integration requires policies that benefit both students and host communities.

In addition to promoting multiculturalism, policies must foster genuine integration and actively address key issues such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, social isolation, and combating racism and xenophobia (Auschner & Jiang, 2025; Yang & Du, 2025; Rickert, 2025; Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025). This may involve strengthening prearrival orientation, providing culturally sensitive mental health support services, implementing peer mentorship programs, and launching proactive antidiscrimination initiatives to promote true belonging.

Academically, while recognizing STEM contributions, policies should also support Chinese students in adapting to diverse pedagogical styles (e.g., emphasizing critical thinking and participation), clarifying academic expectations, and addressing any challenges related to academic integrity. Policies should ensure that academic contributions are genuinely reciprocal and that Chinese students are fully integrated into the academic community, not merely as high-performing individuals.

More broadly, the findings underscore the need for adaptive, inclusive, and responsive policies that account for the complex realities of international student mobility in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape (IAUP, 2025). The disconnect between policymakers' often positive perceptions and students' documented challenges (e.g., anti-Asian racism, lack of culturally sensitive support during COVID-19, restrictive visa policies) highlights that policies designed to attract or benefit students may inadvertently create or exacerbate challenges or simply fail to address existing issues (Rodriguez et al., 2025; Rickert, 2025; AACSB, 2025; Sunrise International, 2025). Therefore, policymakers must focus more intently on the lived experiences and challenges of Chinese international students to ensure that policies are truly effective and equitable.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study, while providing valuable insights from the perspective of policymakers, has certain limitations. The reliance on purposive sampling at specific international education events means that the findings may not be fully generalizable to all policymakers or institutions globally. The perspectives captured are limited to those present and willing to be interviewed. Furthermore, the acknowledgment that some participants were Chinese nationals working in international education, while offering unique insights, could introduce the potential for social desirability bias or a tendency to emphasize positive aspects due to their professional roles or cultural background. While efforts were made to encourage candid responses, this potential for bias is acknowledged.

In the context of these insights and limitations, future research should focus on:

**Effectiveness of Policy Interventions:** Investigating the efficacy of specific institutional policies and support programs in mitigating the identified academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges faced by Chinese international students (e.g., mental health support, anticraism initiatives, and cultural integration programs).

**Sustainability of Economic Contributions:** Conducting longitudinal studies on the sustainability of Chinese students' economic contributions to host economies, particularly in light of global policy shifts (e.g., visa caps, economic downturns) and increasing competition from emerging study destinations.

**Comparative Perspectives:** Undertaking comparative studies that integrate student perspectives with policymaker viewpoints to provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the international education ecosystem and the impact of policies on student experiences.

These recommendations aim to enhance the integration and contributions of Chinese students in the global educational landscape, fostering a more nuanced and responsive approach to international education policy.

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