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Emotional Intelligence and Academic Resilience Among International Students in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores emotional intelligence (EI) as a coping resource for international PhD students, drawing on my experiences studying in China. Using Goleman’s EI framework, this study examines how self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills support my adaptation to academic pressures, cultural challenges, and mental well-being. This reflection highlights the role of EI in fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and supportive relationships amid stress and isolation. The findings highlight the significance of EI in promoting academic persistence and psychological adjustment among international students. Practical recommendations suggest integrating EI development into university support services. This research bridges theoretical insights with personal experiences, contributing to an understanding of the impact of emotional intelligence in higher education contexts.*

Keywords: Academic resilience, coping strategies, cultural adaptation, emotional intelligence, international PhD student.

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INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI), defined as an individual’s ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others, has been widely recognized as a critical factor influencing personal and professional success

(Tripathy, 2018). First popularized by Goleman (1995), EI encompasses five key domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills. These competencies play crucial roles in decision-making, stress management, and interpersonal relationships. This study is grounded in Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence (EI) theory, which conceptualizes EI as a set of five core competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1998). Goleman's model emphasizes the importance of these emotional and social skills in facilitating effective decision-making, stress management, and the development of interpersonal relationships. Applying Goleman's framework to the context of international PhD students allows this study to explore how these EI competencies influence students' ability to adapt to cultural transitions, manage academic pressures, and maintain mental well-being (AL-Qadri et al., 2022). By focusing on Goleman's EI theory, the research provides a structured lens through which to analyze personal experiences and coping mechanisms that contribute to resilience and psychological health in the challenging environment of international higher education (Goleman, 1998).

Recent research has highlighted the significant contribution of EI to adapting to challenging environments, particularly for individuals navigating cultural transitions (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). For international students, the transition to a new educational system and cultural context presents multifaceted emotional and psychological demands that require resilience, emotional regulation, and strong social competencies (Bethel et al., 2020). The ability to manage emotions effectively, sustain motivation despite setbacks, and establish meaningful social connections is essential for maintaining mental well-being and achieving academic success (Shengyao et al., 2024; Tang & He, 2023).

Studying abroad encompasses more than academic attainment; it involves confronting cultural dissonance, language barriers, and unfamiliar social norms that can provoke feelings of alienation and stress (Cong et al., 2024; Garbati & Rothschild, 2016; Mulyadi et al., 2024). International students must adjust to diverse pedagogical approaches, research expectations, and rigorous performance standards that often differ markedly from those in their home countries (AL-Qadri et al., 2022; Dai, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018). Psychologically, the absence of familiar support networks can exacerbate loneliness and self-doubt, making emotional resilience a key factor in their capacity to thrive (Girmay & Singh, 2019; Mohamud & Madderla, 2024). Additionally, financial constraints, visa uncertainties, and career anxieties further compound these challenges, adversely affecting mental well-being (Olatunji et al., 2023; Uдах & Francis, 2022). Given this complex constellation of stressors, students with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to navigate the challenges of studying abroad, as EI enables effective stress management, adaptability, and proactive help-seeking behaviors (Khorasani et al., 2023).

This paper employs a narrative inquiry approach to present a personal reflection on the role of emotional intelligence in shaping my experience as an international PhD student in China. Through reflective storytelling integrated with relevant theoretical perspectives, I examine how EI influences my ability to cope with academic pressures, cultural adaptation, and personal challenges. By

combining lived experience and scholarly literature, this paper aims to illuminate the transformative power of emotional intelligence in fostering resilience and psychological well-being. Furthermore, it offers insights for universities and policymakers in supporting international students in developing emotional competencies that enhance both academic outcomes and personal growth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach, a qualitative research methodology that focuses on exploring and interpreting lived experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable for investigating complex, subjective phenomena such as emotional intelligence in the context of cultural adaptation and academic resilience, where personal meaning-making is central (Green et al., 2017). The primary “data” in this research consists of my own reflections and recollections as an international PhD student studying in China. These reflections were recorded over time through journaling, personal notes, and retrospective writing. This form of self-narrative enables a deep, contextualized understanding of how emotional intelligence has shaped my experiences in navigating academic, cultural, and emotional challenges. The analysis was conducted using a thematic narrative approach, in which stories were examined and interpreted through the lens of Daniel Goleman’s emotional intelligence framework, focusing on five core components: self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1998). This theoretical triangulation strengthens analytic rigor by connecting personal narratives to established constructs in EI research. While narrative inquiry embraces subjectivity and recognizes the researcher as both a participant and analyst, this study maintains methodological rigor by transparently documenting reflective processes, linking insights to the extant literature, and critically examining personal biases. Limitations include the non-generalizability of findings; however, the study offers valuable transferable insights for understanding the role of EI in international doctoral education.

RESULTS

Challenges as an International PhD Student

The journey of an international PhD student is marked by a series of academic, cultural, and psychological challenges that test both intellectual capabilities and emotional resilience, which are grounded in emotional intelligence (Wu, 2022). While pursuing a doctoral degree is inherently demanding, these challenges multiply when students are immersed in a foreign environment where linguistic, social, and institutional norms differ significantly from those of their home countries (Lai & Jung, 2024). Successfully navigating these obstacles requires not only academic competence but also the ability to apply emotional intelligence, manage stress, adapt to new cultural expectations,

and maintain psychological well-being, which are critical for overall success (Shengyao et al., 2024).

According to Yeh et al. (2022), one of the foremost challenges for international students is cultural adaptation and social integration. Relocating to a new country necessitates adjusting to unfamiliar customs, traditions, and social norms, often leading to cultural dissonance and emotional discomfort (Alkhalaf et al., 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Olagunju et al., 2024). Everyday interactions, including classroom discussions and social engagements, can feel daunting due to differing communication styles and societal expectations (Holliman et al., 2024). Language barriers exacerbate these difficulties, as students struggle to express complex ideas fluently, sometimes resulting in frustration, self-doubt, and social withdrawal, factors that reinforce feelings of isolation (Abu--Rabiah, 2025; Holliman et al., 2024). Unlike undergraduate or master's students, PhD candidates often work independently, which limits structured social interactions (Feizi & Elgar, 2023). Establishing meaningful relationships with peers and faculty requires heightened social awareness and adaptability (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Lorenzetti et al., 2023). Without strong support networks, loneliness can ensue, negatively impacting mental health and academic motivation (Maharaj et al., 2024). Here, developing emotional intelligence, particularly empathy and social skills, becomes essential in overcoming social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging (Silke et al., 2024; Ying et al., 2024).

International doctoral studies also impose significant academic pressures and performance expectations. These demands include engaging in independent research, critical analysis, and scholarly writing at a high level of rigor (Albertyn, 2024). For international students, the challenge intensifies owing to differences in academic systems, pedagogical approaches, and assessment standards (Brownlow et al., 2023). Many students transition from structured learning environments to academic cultures that prioritize self-directed inquiry and originality, a shift that can induce anxiety around meeting expectations, publishing research, and defending dissertations (Lo, 2024; Olagunju et al., 2024). Furthermore, language proficiency is a critical factor; nonnative speakers often face difficulties in writing, presenting, and participating in scholarly debates. The fear of linguistic errors or miscommunication can hinder engagement and erode confidence, thereby affecting academic performance (Hamade et al., 2024; Phyo et al., 2024). Emotional intelligence components such as self-regulation and perseverance are crucial for managing these pressures and sustaining motivation through setbacks (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020).

The cumulative impact of these academic and cultural stressors often manifests in significant psychological and emotional struggles. Many international students experience feelings of isolation, impostor syndrome, and uncertainty about their future, which contribute to anxiety and emotional distress (Clark et al., 2022; Mulyadi et al., 2024). Self-doubt about one's abilities and the legitimacy of pursuing doctoral studies are common, especially when familiar emotional support systems are absent due to geographic separation from family and friends (Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2023). Additionally, financial constraints and visa-related uncertainties compound stress levels. Limited scholarships may

necessitate balancing academic responsibilities with part-time employment or research assistantships (Akiba et al., 2024; Maharaj et al., 2024). Visa restrictions can impede mobility and create anxiety over postgraduate career prospects (Liu, 2024; Mihut et al., 2025). Successfully managing these multifaceted stressors requires emotional resilience, adaptability, and effective coping strategies, all of which are deeply intertwined with the development and application of emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence as a Coping Mechanism: Theoretical Insights and Personal Reflection

According to Wang and Chiu (2024), the ability to navigate the challenges of studying abroad extends beyond academic knowledge and technical skills; it requires a strong foundation in emotional intelligence (EI). As international PhD students encounter cultural adaptation struggles, academic pressures, and psychological stressors, their capacity to regulate emotions, stay motivated, and maintain positive relationships plays a crucial role in their overall well-being (Bethel et al., 2020). Shengyao et al. (2024) highlighted emotional intelligence as a coping mechanism that allows students to manage stress effectively, build resilience, and foster a supportive academic and social environment.

The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely studied within psychology, education, and leadership. One of the most influential frameworks is Daniel Goleman's model, which identifies five core components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1998). These components are essential for international PhD candidates, who must navigate the complexities of adapting to new academic, cultural, and social environments. By applying Goleman's model to my personal experiences in China, I reflect on how each EI component shaped my ability to cope with doctoral challenges.

Self-awareness: Recognizing emotional responses and mental well-being

Self-awareness, the ability to recognize and understand one's emotions, is the cornerstone of EI (Goleman, 1995). For international students, the mindfulness of emotional reactions to challenges such as language frustration, academic anxiety, or loneliness is the first step toward effective management (Zheng et al., 2023). Ramos-Vera et al. (2024) reported that without self-awareness, students may internalize stress, risking burnout. The conscious identification of emotional triggers enables proactive regulation through mindfulness, reflection, or professional support (London et al., 2023).

Upon arriving in China on June 2, 2023,

"I initially struggled with feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt, facing a new academic environment and culture. The first months were marked by frustration, especially due to language difficulties, as Chinese is

neither my first nor second language. I often feel overwhelmed by coursework, research, and homesickness.”

However, by becoming more self-aware of these emotional responses,

“I identified the sources of my stress and addressed them more effectively. Recognizing the emotional impact of cultural displacement allowed me to understand that these feelings were a natural part of the adjustment process. I began using mindfulness techniques to help me regulate my emotions, and I sought support from fellow international students who were experiencing similar challenges.”

These narratives illustrate how self-awareness allows me to identify and contextualize emotional distress as a natural adjustment response rather than a personal failure. The development of this awareness was pivotal in seeking mindfulness practices and peer support, foundational steps toward emotional regulation and resilience.

Self-Regulation: Managing Stress and Academic Pressures

Self-regulation refers to controlling impulses and managing emotions under pressure (Rodríguez et al., 2022). Doctoral setbacks, such as research difficulties or journal rejections, can provoke frustration and self-doubt (Fernández-García et al., 2023). Emotionally intelligent students refer to obstacles as growth opportunities (Jenaabadi, 2014). Time management and discipline, key aspects of self-regulation, help balance academic and personal demands and mitigate procrastination and burnout (Sirois, 2023).

During my first semester,

“I struggled to juggle research, writing, and adjusting to life in China, leading to anxiety and frustration.”

By self-regulation,

“I adopted time management strategies, breaking tasks into manageable steps to reduce overwhelm and maintain focus. Regular physical activity and meditation became essential tools for emotional balance. This ability to regulate emotions during stressful periods was crucial for sustaining productivity and composure.”

This experience demonstrates self-regulation’s role in maintaining motivation and emotional stability, aligning with theoretical insights that such strategies enable students to navigate doctoral pressures successfully.

Intrinsic Motivation: Sustaining Academic and Personal Growth

Intrinsic motivation, the internal drive to pursue meaningful goals, is critical for international PhD student success (Imtiaz et al., 2023). The isolating and demanding nature of doctoral research requires strong personal commitment

(Brownlow et al., 2023). Emotionally intelligent students align academic work with personal aspirations, fostering perseverance despite challenges (Rodríguez-González et al., 2021).

When faced with research setbacks or criticism,

“I reminded myself of my research’s purpose and the long-term rewards of earning a PhD, which sustained my perseverance during difficult times.”

This personal reflection echoes findings that intrinsic motivation underpins resilience, promoting adaptability and proactive problem solving, which protects against disengagement and loss of confidence.

Empathy and Social Skills: Building Support Networks

Adapting abroad is a social process that requires empathy, the ability to understand others’ emotions, and effective social skills (Goleman, 1995; Olagunju et al., 2024). Empathy facilitates the navigation of cultural differences with sensitivity, whereas strong social skills enable communication, conflict resolution, and integration (Kristiana et al., 2022).

As international students,

“Establishing connections with peers, professors, and local communities was vital. Empathy helped me understand diverse perspectives and cultural nuances, fostering meaningful relationships that provided emotional support.”

“Active participation in academic discussions, feedback sessions, and cultural events enhanced my social integration, reducing isolation and enhancing belonging.”

These experiences highlight empathy and social competence as key emotional intelligence dimensions supporting social integration and mental well-being, which is consistent with scholarly evidence on international student success.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in navigating the complex challenges faced by international PhD students, using my lived experience as a narrative inquiry framed by Goleman’s (1998) EI model. The findings affirm that EI components, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills, are critical resources that support mental health, resilience, and academic success amid cultural adaptation, academic pressures, and psychological stress. Consistent with prior studies by Bethel et al. (2020), Shengyao et al. (2024), and Wang and Chiu (2024), this study

illustrates how emotional intelligence functions as a multifaceted coping mechanism. Self-awareness has emerged as foundational, enabling recognition and understanding of emotional responses triggered by cultural dissonance and academic demands. This aligns with the findings of Ramos-Vera et al. (2024), who emphasize self-awareness as a precursor to effective stress management and burnout prevention. The reflective narrative confirms that increased emotional insight prompts proactive regulation strategies, such as mindfulness and social support, which resonates with London et al.'s (2023) findings on emotional metacognition. Self-regulation was shown to facilitate adaptive responses to academic setbacks and pressure, supporting Rodríguez et al.'s (2022) characterization of EI as essential for maintaining composure and focus under stress. My personal account of using goal setting and physical activities to sustain motivation parallels Sirois's (2023) evidence on coping strategies that enhance persistence in doctoral studies. This highlights the importance of self-discipline and emotional control as protective factors against academic burnout. Intrinsic motivation emerged as a key driver of perseverance, aligning with Imtiaz et al.'s (2023) emphasis on internal commitment for sustained academic engagement. The narrative elucidates how aligning research with personal values nurtured resilience, supporting Shengyao et al.'s (2024) argument that motivated students to view failure as a growth opportunity. This highlights EI's role in promoting a growth mindset, which is essential for doctoral success. Empathy and social skills are vital for building a support network and facilitating cultural integration, reflecting Kristiana et al. (2022) and Olagunju et al. (2024). The lived experience of establishing meaningful academic and social connections underscores the social dimension of EI, which helps mitigate isolation and enhances psychological well-being (Seery et al., 2021). These findings highlight that EI extends beyond intrapersonal management to encompass interpersonal competence, enabling international students to thrive within diverse academic environments. This study contributes novel insights by linking Goleman's theoretical model with an autoethnographic narrative, thereby enriching the understanding of how EI manifests practically in the context of international doctoral education. It bridges the gap between abstract EI theory and lived student experience, offering a nuanced perspective on the emotional and social skills necessary for academic resilience and well-being. Furthermore, this research highlights the crucial need for universities to incorporate EI development into student support programs, expanding beyond academic skill-building to encompass emotional and relational competencies.

Implications

This study has several important implications for theory, practice, and policy related to international doctoral education and student support services.

Theoretical Implications:

By integrating Goleman's (1998) emotional intelligence framework with an autoethnographic narrative, this research advances the understanding of EI as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal resource critical for academic resilience and psychological well-being. It contributes a nuanced, lived-experience perspective to the EI literature, illustrating how the five components of EI manifest dynamically during cultural adaptation and academic challenges. This approach encourages future scholars to consider narrative inquiry as a valuable method to deepen theoretical insights into complex emotional processes in educational contexts.

Practical Implications for Universities:

The findings highlight the urgent need for universities to expand student support beyond academic skills by incorporating emotional intelligence development programs. Orientation and ongoing training sessions can include EI skill-building focused on self-awareness, emotion regulation, motivation, empathy, and social communication. Such programs could equip international students with strategies to manage stress, foster meaningful social connections, and maintain motivation throughout their doctoral journey. Creating structured peer mentoring and intercultural engagement opportunities can enhance social integration, reduce isolation, and strengthen students' support networks.

Policy implications:

Policymakers and higher education administrators should recognize emotional intelligence as a critical dimension of student success and mental health. Allocating resources to mental health services that emphasize emotional regulation, resilience building, and culturally sensitive counseling can improve outcomes for international students. Policies encouraging collaboration between academic departments and student affairs units can facilitate holistic support systems that address both academic and emotional challenges.

Implications for International Students:

This research underscores the importance of encouraging international doctoral students to actively cultivate emotional intelligence skills. The development of self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills can empower students to navigate the complexities of studying abroad more effectively, contributing to better mental health, academic persistence, and personal growth.

Limitations of this study include its focus on a single participant's experience, which may limit its generalizability. Future research should consider larger samples and diverse cultural contexts to validate and expand upon these findings. Nonetheless, the detailed narrative approach offers a rich, contextualized

understanding that quantitative studies may overlook, underscoring the value of qualitative inquiry in exploring complex psychosocial phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in shaping the experience of an international PhD student navigating academic, cultural, and psychological challenges. Grounded in a five-component EI model and framed through narrative inquiry, the research demonstrated that self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and social skills are vital in fostering resilience, managing stress, and building supportive relationships. By reflecting on my journey as a doctoral student in China, this study provides rich, contextual insights into how emotional intelligence facilitates adaptation to unfamiliar environments and rigorous academic demands. It also highlights the transformative potential of EI in promoting mental well-being and sustaining motivation in the face of setbacks. The findings have important implications for theory, emphasizing the value of integrating narrative approaches with established EI frameworks to capture the lived realities of international students. Practically, the study recommends that higher education institutions incorporate EI development into their student support services and foster inclusive, emotionally supportive learning environments. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how emotional intelligence serves as a cornerstone for academic success and personal growth in the international doctoral context. It invites further research and action to empower students and institutions alike in addressing the multifaceted challenges of global higher education.

Note. In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation

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