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Harmony in Transition: Navigating Academic, Well-Being, and Sociocultural Landscapes in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT: *This mixed-methods study explores the academic, sociocultural, and well-being experiences of Chinese international students in UK higher education. Drawing on questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, the research identifies a phased adjustment process: initial navigation of academic expectations, followed by relational consolidation through peer networks and subsequent expansion into sociocultural engagement and academic agency. These interconnected domains are associated with reported personal and professional development. Participation in sociocultural initiatives at different stages was associated with varied experiences, depending on students' developmental readiness. Students entering via pre-sessional English programs reported uneven preparedness, indicating the importance of sustained academic mentoring. Accounts of mental health challenges point to the relevance of culturally responsive, community-based support alongside traditional counseling services. The results position informal institutional spaces as developmental mechanisms rather than supplementary supports. The study offers evidence-based recommendations for phased support strategies and inclusive pedagogy to enhance long-term academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and well-being.*

Keywords: academic integration, sociocultural engagement, cultural adaptation, well-being, developmental readiness, inclusive education

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese international students are a familiar presence on British university campuses, prompting reflections on cultural identity and questions of “who we are” and “where we come from.” These reflections mirror the diverse life experiences that international students bring to the academic and social landscapes of higher education. As one participant in this study remarked:

“Studying here in the UK has given me great opportunities to connect with people across the globe, sharing our own culture and values with each other. My life would have been so dull if I had stayed in my hometown.”

In the current globalized higher education climate, this cohort provides an important perspective on academic transition and student well-being. At many UK research-intensive universities, Chinese students comprise a substantial proportion of the student body, contributing to both campus diversity and institutional sustainability (HESA, 2026; UKCISA, 2025). Beyond their economic and demographic prominence, their distinctive academic and sociocultural pressures make them a critical population for understanding transition, well-being, and inclusion (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019; Ebel, 2024).

Although previous studies have examined social integration, cultural adaptation, mental health, and academic performance (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Christidis, 2021; Lai et al., 2023), less is known about how these dimensions intersect in students’ daily experience. In particular, further research is needed to understand how Chinese international students manage intercultural communication challenges, adapt to different pedagogical practices, and engage with both formal and informal support networks.

This mixed-methods study, incorporating questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, explores these intersections through the case of the Intercultural Café—a university-led initiative designed to facilitate informal, peer-led dialogue. This space is conceptualized not simply as a support tool but also as a potential site of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and community building during academic and personal transitions.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are academic integration and sociocultural engagement—particularly through initiatives such as the Intercultural Café—associated with the academic performance of Chinese international students in the UK?
2. How is cultural adaptation associated with well-being and personal development among Chinese international students, and what role do informal peer support networks play in this process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on international student experience highlights how academic demands, social relationships, and well-being interact in shaping student transitions. For Chinese international students in the UK, adjustment extends beyond the classroom, unfolding across institutional structures, peer networks, and informal social spaces. Rather than framing adaptation as an individual psychological process, this review adopts a transitional perspective (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016), recognizing that belonging and performance are negotiated within specific structural and cultural contexts (Deuchar, 2022).

The review is organized into three thematic strands: (1) academic integration and performance; (2) sociocultural engagement; and (3) cultural adaptation and well-being.

Academic Integration and Performance

Academic integration involves more than language proficiency or prior educational background. It is shaped by curriculum design, assessment conventions, classroom norms, and independent learning expectations (Leask, 2015; Spangler, 2025). Research consistently identifies challenges related to critical thinking, classroom participation, and feedback interpretation among Chinese students in higher education (Malik & Sang, 2017; Yang, 2025).

Developmental models, such as Bennett's (2017) intercultural sensitivity framework, conceptualize adaptation as progressive skill development. However, sociological perspectives emphasize how institutional norms privilege particular forms of participation and knowledge production (Marginson, 2014; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). From this viewpoint, adjustment involves learning to interpret and respond to institutional expectations, not simply improving linguistic competence.

Support mechanisms such as pre-session courses and orientation programs can ease early transition (Christidis, 2021). However, less research has examined how sustained, informal, peer-based initiatives relate to longer-term academic engagement. Academic performance, therefore, should not be understood only as an outcome of prior preparation but as part of an evolving process of integration.

Sociocultural Engagement

Sociocultural engagement plays a central role in shaping belonging and student outcomes. However, developing meaningful cross-cultural relationships remains challenging (Zheng & Ishii, 2023). Studies document persistent social distance between Chinese international and domestic students, often linked to language confidence, perceived cultural differences, and limited structured opportunities for interaction (Zhang & Jun, 2017; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019).

Schartner and Young (2020) emphasize the interdependence of academic, personal, and social dimensions of transition, suggesting that engagement beyond the classroom is integral to student success. Informal peer networks and institutional initiatives, such as intercultural cafés, can provide spaces for interaction and the development of social capital. Their effectiveness, however, depends on sustained participation and whether students perceive these spaces as genuinely inclusive rather than symbolic.

Institutional structures therefore matter. Group work, extracurricular offerings, and informal social environments can reinforce separation or encourage intercultural exchange (Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Although emerging research suggests that structured but informal initiatives, such as intercultural dialogue groups and student-led spaces (Millard et al., 2021), may support relationship building, less is known about how such spaces intersect with academic integration and well-being over time.

Cultural Adaptation and Well-being

Cultural adaptation both shapes and is shaped by academic and social experiences. Kim's (2008) stress-adaptation-growth model conceptualizes adjustment as cyclical rather than linear, marked by periods of disruption followed by adaptation and development. A similar staged perspective appears in the UKCISA (2017) guidance, which describes movement from initial uncertainty toward increasing autonomy and confidence.

For many Chinese international students, cultural norms surrounding help-seeking complicate engagement with formal well-being services. Stigma around mental health and misalignment between Western counseling approaches and cultural expectations may reduce uptake (Cao et al., 2016; Xie & Xu, 2024). At the same time, peer and family networks can buffer emotional distress and support resilience (Bertram et al., 2014; Xue & Singh, 2025), suggesting that well-being is relational rather than solely individual.

These perspectives indicate that adjustment is not simply emotional stabilization but a negotiated process shaped by institutional responsiveness, peer relationships, and evolving student agency (Jones, 2017).

Research Gap and Rationale

Although academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and well-being are widely recognized as interconnected, they are often examined separately.

Empirical work remains limited in exploring how informal institutional initiatives function as spaces where these domains intersect and evolve over time. While models such as Kim (2008) and UKCISA (2017) describe student transition from uncertainty to autonomy, the mechanisms through which informal institutional spaces contribute to this progression remain underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by examining the Intercultural Café as a case through which academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and well-being can be analyzed together rather than treated as parallel processes.

METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2021). Quantitative data were collected first to identify patterns in academic performance and engagement, followed by qualitative data to explore how students interpreted and navigated these experiences.

Phase 1 surveys examined relationships between academic performance, sociocultural engagement, language proficiency, and cultural adaptation. Phase 2 interviews and focus groups explored how students interpreted academic expectations and negotiated belonging over time.

Research Context

The study was conducted at a UK university with a large population of Chinese international students. Recruitment targeted undergraduate and postgraduate students across business-related and other disciplines. Participants self-identified as Chinese international students and had studied in the UK for at least one academic term, ensuring that they had experienced relevant academic and cultural transitions.

The primary research setting was the Intercultural Café, a weekly initiative promoting engagement between international and domestic students. Activities included language exchange, discussions of UK academic practices, peer mentoring, and collaborative social events. Rather than functioning solely as a support service, the Café operated as an ongoing shared space where academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and cultural adaptation intersected in practice.

Observing participation and self-reported development across an academic year enabled analysis of how engagement evolved and how informal institutional spaces contributed to academic integration and well-being.

Participants and Data Collection

Phase 1: Participant Groups

Two groups captured variation across study stages:

1. Intercultural Café Participants ($n = 110$) from the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years, spanning undergraduate and postgraduate programs in business,

finance, engineering, and social sciences. Most had one to two years of experience in UK higher education.

2. Final-year undergraduates ($n = 103$) from 2021/22, primarily in business, accounting, and economics, with others in law, psychology, engineering, liberal arts, and archaeology. Many had completed prior degrees in China before transitioning to the UK.

Café participants completed questionnaires at the end of Term 1 (December) and Term 2 (June). Data included student records, attendance, demographics, academic performance (semester grades and averages), and sociocultural engagement (participation in extracurricular activities and social networks).

Final-year students completed an end-of-year qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions reflecting on their academic journeys, challenges, and aspirations.

Phase 2: Interviews and Focus Groups

Phase 2 included five semi-structured interviews and two focus groups (April-June 2022). The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviewees were drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate finance-related programs and included both male and female participants. The first focus group (seven participants) explored adaptation challenges and institutional support. The second (six participants) examined communication barriers and integration strategies.

Although the primary focus was Chinese international students, selected focus groups included students from diverse national backgrounds (e.g., India, Nepal, Nigeria, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Saudi Arabia). This reflected the relational nature of the Intercultural Café. Because belonging is shaped through interaction, excluding these participants would have decontextualized the dynamics under study. The analytical focus remained centered on Chinese students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two sequential stages—quantitative followed by qualitative—allowing for comprehensive understanding through data triangulation. This mixed-methods approach enabled the study to move beyond identifying correlational patterns to uncover underlying mechanisms and individual narratives.

Quantitative Analysis

Questionnaire data ($n = 110$) were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in Stata. Multivariate regression was used to examine the associations between the predictors (age, prior degree classification, pre-session English participation, and Intercultural Café engagement) and academic outcomes. Academic performance was measured by total average grades for the current academic year. Effect sizes (Cohen's f^2) were calculated, where applicable, to

evaluate practical significance. Correlation and regression analyses identified relationships among language proficiency, sociocultural engagement, and academic performance, providing a foundation for qualitative interpretation.

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed thematically in NVivo. Initial codes (e.g., learning dynamics, peer support, mental health challenges) were grouped into broader themes aligned within the study framework. Themes were refined iteratively and validated against the dataset. Participatory visual techniques, including emotional graphs and pen portraits (Sheard & Marsh, 2019), were used in interviews and focus groups to trace fluctuations in cultural adaptation and well-being over time.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher holds a professional role in curriculum development and international student support at the institution. This facilitated access but required careful boundary-setting. Recruitment relied on open invitations rather than direct approaches to known students. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their involvement would not affect academic standing or service access.

To minimize influence on responses, the researcher did not facilitate all focus groups alone and used open-ended prompts rather than leading questions. Participant language was preserved where possible, and divergent perspectives were retained rather than consolidated. Reflexive notes documented assumptions and interpretive decisions throughout to ensure transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the university research ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in English, with optional Mandarin clarifications where needed.

RESULTS

The results are organized across three interconnected domains: academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and cultural adaptation and well-being. The synthesis of these experiences points to an overarching outcome: long-term personal and professional growth.

Academic Integration and Performance

The Intercultural Café sample ($n = 110$) was predominantly postgraduate (83%) and female (64%). Nearly half achieved Merit (48%), with 28% attaining

Distinction. Twenty-two percent had completed a pre-sessional English program, reflecting diverse academic and linguistic backgrounds.

Multivariate regression analysis (Table 1) showed that prior degree classification (PRIOR) was the strongest predictor of performance ($p < .01$). Students with higher previous academic attainment were more likely to achieve stronger academic outcomes, indicating continuity in academic capital across educational contexts (Schartner and Young, 2020).

Table 1: Multivariate Regression of Significant Predictors of Academic Performance

Variable	B	SE	t	p	95% CI	
					LL	UL
PRIOR	3.425**	0.999	3.43	.001	1.435	5.415
AGE	0.293	0.178	1.65	.103	-0.061	0.648
PRESESSIONAL	-3.927**	1.356	-2.90	.005	-6.628	-1.226
JOIN (Term 2 relative to Term 1)	4.282**	1.538	2.78	.007	1.219	7.346
JOIN (Term 3 relative to Term 1)	5.442	3.167	1.72	.090	-0.865	11.749
Constant	50.438	5.454	9.25	< .001	39.575	61.301

Note. N = 110. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error of B. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit. $p < .01$ indicated by **.

- Dependent variable: Academic Performance, measured as total average grades for the current academic year.
- PRIOR: Degree classification from students' previous degree (1 = Pass, 2 = Merit, 3 = Distinction).
- AGE: Student age at the time of study.
- PRESESSIONAL: Participation in a pre-sessional English program (1 = participation, 0 = nonparticipation).
- JOIN: Timing of students' engagement with the Intercultural Café (1 = Term 1, 2 = Term 2, 3 = Term 3).

Participation in pre-sessional English programs (PRESESSIONAL) was negatively associated with average performance ($p < .01$). This likely reflects preexisting transition challenges among students requiring additional language preparation, echoing Christidis (2021) and highlighting the need for more tailored academic support. Interview participants who had completed pre-sessional courses described entering their degree programs with heightened anxiety about participation and assessment conventions. As one student recalled:

"At the beginning, I was so nervous about asking questions in class. I felt my English wasn't good enough. However, after a few weeks, I realized my lecturers and tutors are supportive, and it gave me the courage to participate more."

The timing of engagement with the Intercultural Café (JOIN) was also associated with performance differences. Students who began participating in Term 2 demonstrated higher average outcomes than those who joined in Term 1 ($p < .01$), while Term 3 joiners showed positive but nonsignificant patterns ($p = .090$). This suggests that engagement may be most beneficial once initial academic uncertainty stabilizes. One participant explained:

"I felt more confident by the time I joined the Café, which made it easier to engage and benefit from the activities."

Age was positively but not significantly related to performance ($p = .103$), suggesting that prior preparation and access to targeted support were more closely linked to students' academic results than life experience alone.

The model explained 25.1% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = .251$), with a medium-to-large effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = .335$). Overall, academic outcomes were shaped by both prior preparation and evolving engagement patterns.

Qualitative data illuminate what this transition involved in practice. Students consistently described the first term as cognitively demanding. Challenges centered less on subject knowledge and more on interpreting assessment criteria, feedback conventions, seminar participation norms, and independent learning structures. One participant shared:

"At first, it was overwhelming to understand the lectures and adapt to the teaching style. However, over time, I gained confidence and learned to engage more actively in discussions."

Participatory tools, including emotional graphs and pen portraits, revealed that during the initial 3-6 months, students' concerns focused on understanding lectures, adapting to new teaching methods, and interpreting coursework feedback. As they settled in, attention shifted toward producing higher-quality work, contributing to discussion, and building social networks. One student captured this transition:

"Once I got used to the teaching style and knew how to manage my assignments, I started enjoying discussion in seminars and made friends through group projects."

Over time, increased familiarity with expectations, alongside peer and lecturer support, contributed to growing academic confidence. Students frequently linked grade improvement to a clearer interpretation of expectations rather than simply improved language proficiency. As one participant explained:

“Interpreting coursework feedback was difficult at first because it felt vague. However, after attending workshops and seeking clarification, I started to understand what was expected, and my grades improved.”

Taken together, these accounts suggest that academic integration was largely an interpretive process. Students first learned how to read institutional norms before they could optimize performance.

Sociocultural Engagement

Among final-year undergraduates ($n = 103$), 34% identified an inclusive culture as easing their transition, and 36% highlighted initiatives such as Freshers’ Week and the Intercultural Café as important early points of contact. While survey data showed no direct correlation with academic outcomes, qualitative feedback highlighted their role in reducing social isolation:

“The Intercultural Café helped me meet people from other countries, and I felt less isolated.”

Collaborative learning was particularly valued, with 73% reporting that peer-based study enhanced their academic experience. Group projects and shared study sessions were described as academically beneficial and motivational, echoing Polly et al. (2017) on the value of teamwork and project-based learning. One participant shared:

“Working on group projects in the library was one of the best parts of my academic experience. It helped me learn from others and stay motivated.”

However, deeper integration with British peers outside academic settings remained limited. Intercultural focus groups revealed a desire for broader friendships but difficulty establishing common ground:

“I want to build friendships with British students, but it’s hard to find common ground. Most of my friends are other internationals.”

Cultural events, festive celebrations, and informal social activities provided lower-pressure opportunities for interaction and acted as important bridging spaces. Students frequently described these occasions as moments when they felt relaxed enough to engage more openly, reducing the intensity associated with academic settings:

“My favorite memory is having fun with my friends, going to K-Pop events... I was able to meet all my friends and gain support from them through fun times and bad times.”

These findings underscore the importance of both structured and informal social opportunities. Such spaces are associated with cultural adaptation and emotional well-being, supporting the development of relational security within a new environment.

Cultural Adaptation and Well-being

Cultural adaptation emerged as a key factor closely associated with well-being among final-year students ($n = 103$). Campus and city environments were identified by 60% of respondents as enhancing well-being, with natural surroundings and facilities contributing to positive experiences (Kleinman & Benson, 2006). However, external stressors such as weather (17%) and lingering pandemic effects (12%) complicated adaptation, echoing Ward et al.'s (2001) emphasis on the role of external conditions. Only 3% mentioned physical health issues, suggesting that sociocultural factors were more pressing concerns.

Emotional adjustment was rarely described as linear. Students spoke of fluctuation in their academic journey, with initial excitement followed by homesickness, anxiety, and self-doubt, consistent with Kim (2008) and Bilecen et al. (2023). Stress was particularly acute when academic demands intersected with linguistic barriers. Sixty-four percent reported heightened exam anxiety linked to the challenge of expressing complex ideas:

“The pressure to perform academically is immense, and sometimes I feel like I can’t keep up, especially when I struggle to communicate my ideas in class.”

Peer networks played a stabilizing role during early adjustment. Eighty-three percent relied primarily on friends for emotional and academic support, reinforcing the importance of peer relationships in intercultural transitions (Furnham, 2019). Co-nationals and international peers were often perceived as safer spaces for support, a pattern echoed in previous research (Zhang & Jun, 2017; Christidis, 2021):

“I feel more comfortable with my friends from China because we understand each other’s struggles.”

Institutional services, particularly language support and academic counseling, were widely appreciated. Twenty-nine percent valued lecturer support, while 35% cited broader university services as important. Some students also reported improved understanding of British academic and communication norms through intercultural communication workshops:

“The workshops helped me understand the cultural differences in communication and how to adjust my expectations.”

However, only 12% reported using professional well-being services, indicating underutilization and the need for stronger institutional promotion of these services (Ma et al., 2020). Interviews suggested that many students hesitated to access them, often due to unfamiliarity with the concept of ‘well-being’ or cultural stigma around seeking help:

“At first, I didn’t understand the meaning of the word ‘well-being.’ I think because of this confusion, most Asians like myself would not seek support as we don’t want to appear as the weak ones.”

Over time, comfort with institutional systems increased, yet peer support remained the primary coping mechanism. These results indicate that emotional resilience developed gradually through clearer academic expectations and strengthened social networks rather than isolated counseling engagement.

Personal Development and Growth

Beyond academic and sociocultural adjustment, final-year undergraduates ($n = 103$) emphasized personal and professional development as key aspects of their international education experience. Over half (54%) reported growth in teamwork, time management, and interpersonal communication skills. These competencies were attributed not only to formal coursework but also to sustained engagement in peer-based and informal institutional spaces. Participants frequently linked relational security to academic confidence:

“Once I made friends and felt more confident, my academic performance improved. I felt happier, and I can start to enjoy life.”

As adjustment progressed, students described their experience as transformative, shifting from cautious newcomers to active participants. This transition involved increased independence, self-efficacy, and intercultural awareness. Improved classroom participation, a clearer understanding of feedback, and expanded social networks contributed to a stronger sense of belonging. This mix of growth and challenge reflects Bennett’s (2017) model, where academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and cultural adaptation are intertwined.

Students also linked intercultural interaction to career readiness. Sixty-six percent highlighted cultural competence as valuable for employment, viewing the ability to navigate diverse perspectives as a tangible outcome of their international experience:

“Studying here has given me opportunities to connect with people from all over the world and share our cultures.”

Another student added:

“The experience here has made me more independent and confident, and I’m better prepared for my future career.”

While successful academic and sociocultural integration improved well-being and confidence, career concerns persisted for over one-third of respondents. This indicates ongoing uncertainty regarding poststudy transitions and highlights the need for phased employability support and alumni networking.

Collectively, these findings illustrate how peer networks, institutional responsiveness, and targeted engagement foster transferable skills—including intercultural communication, adaptability, and collaboration—essential for success in multicultural work environments.

DISCUSSION

The integrated themes summarized in Table 2—derived from the Intercultural Café cohort, the final-year undergraduate survey, and qualitative interviews and focus groups—confirm established findings in international student scholarship, particularly the importance of belonging, peer support, and well-being in shaping adjustment (Bennett, 2017; Zhang & Jun, 2017). However, this study extends the literature beyond these confirmatory insights in three critical ways.

First, by foregrounding the temporal sequencing of integration, the research nuances traditional staged models (Kim, 2008; UKCISA, 2017) by identifying specific windows of developmental readiness. Second, repositioning informal institutional spaces as adaptive mechanisms rather than supplementary supports challenges the academic-social binary often found in transition frameworks (Schartner & Young, 2020). Third, the results reframe adaptation as a negotiated process shaped by institutional responsiveness and evolving student agency (Jones, 2017; Deuchar, 2022).

A Phased, Rather Than Parallel, Model of Integration

Most frameworks conceptualize academic integration, sociocultural engagement, and cultural adaptation as interrelated and mutually reinforcing domains (Schartner & Young, 2020). While this study confirms such interdependence, the data suggest that these domains do not unfold simultaneously in practice. Instead, integration appears to progress in stages.

In the first stage, students prioritized what might be described as academic decoding. Interestingly, early stress centered less on subject knowledge and more on interpreting expectations, assessment criteria, and participation norms. Linguistic concerns often signal deeper uncertainty about institutional rules and tacit academic conventions (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Yang, 2025). During this phase, sociocultural engagement remained cautious and selective.

The second stage involved relational consolidation. Peer networks—often initially co-national—provided the emotional stability and informal academic scaffolding necessary to reduce anxiety. This relational anchoring allowed students to test participation more confidently in formal settings (Zhang & Jun, 2017). Well-being stabilization functioned as a bridge between early uncertainty and academic consolidation rather than as a parallel process.

In the third stage, students described broader sociocultural engagement and stronger academic agency. Importantly, improvements in academic performance were most strongly associated with this later phase. Quantitative findings showing stronger outcomes among Term 2 participants suggest that engagement is most effective once initial academic uncertainty has been navigated. Furthermore, the acquisition of interpersonal communication and collaborative problem-solving skills through the Intercultural Café further suggests that informal spaces supported holistic development in low-pressure environments (Buckley and Lee, 2021). Integration, therefore, appears cumulative rather than immediate.

Table 2: Integrated Themes Across Phase 1 (Survey) and Phase 2 (Interviews/Focus Groups)

Theme	Phase 1: Quantitative Patterns	Phase 2: Qualitative Insights	Integration: Convergence/ Divergence
Academic Integration & Performance	Prior attainment was the strongest predictor. Pre-sessional participation was associated with lower average performance. Later Café engagement was linked to stronger outcomes.	Early difficulty centered on interpreting expectations rather than content knowledge. Confidence increased once assessment norms were understood.	Convergence: Academic success linked to interpretive adaptation and confidence. Divergence: Pre-sessional association reflects prior challenges rather than program limitations.
Sociocultural Engagement	High value placed on peer learning (73%). Inclusive culture eased transition (34%). Limited interaction with domestic peers.	Desire for cross-cultural friendships but reliance on other international peers. Informal events reduced isolation.	Convergence: Peer relationships central to belonging. Divergence: Institutional opportunities exist, but deeper integration remains uneven.
Cultural Adaptation & Well-being	Exam stress high (64%). Majority relied on peer support (83%). Low uptake of formal well-being services (12%).	Emotional adjustment described as fluctuating. Hesitation to seek formal support due to stigma or unfamiliarity.	Strong convergence: Well-being socially anchored rather than service-led. Adjustment experienced as cyclical.
Personal Development & Growth	54% reported development of transferable skills. 66% linked intercultural competence to employability.	Identity shift from uncertainty to autonomy. Increased confidence, independence, and career awareness.	Synthesis: Growth emerges cumulatively from academic integration, sociocultural engagement and well-being stabilization rather than from isolated interventions.

This phased progression extends existing adjustment models (Kim, 2008; UKCISA, 2017) by introducing temporal differentiation. Rather than assuming that the academic, sociocultural, and well-being domains develop in parallel, these findings suggest that relational security often precedes academic confidence. Consequently, well-being stabilization operates as a transitional mechanism between early disorientation and later performance consolidation.

Informal Institutional Spaces as Adaptive Mechanisms

This research repositions informal institutional spaces as adaptive mechanisms rather than supplementary social clubs. Intercultural initiatives are often evaluated through academic outcomes, retention, performance, or employability metrics (Tinto, 2012; Jones, 2017). In this study, survey data showed no simple linear correlation between participation and grades. However, regression results indicate that the timing of engagement matters. Students who joined in Term 2 achieved stronger academic outcomes than early joiners, suggesting that institutional support is mediated by developmental readiness rather than operating as an automatic benefit.

Qualitative accounts help explain this pattern. The Intercultural Café did not directly produce academic gains. Rather, it functioned as a site for sociocultural engagement, facilitating relational confidence, identity negotiation, and intercultural competence—capacities widely associated with successful adjustment (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). These processes created the psychological conditions necessary for students to eventually engage more deeply with their formal studies.

Repositioning such spaces as adaptive mechanisms shifts evaluation away from immediate grade effects toward interpretive clarity, emotional stability, and social anchoring (Jones, 2017; Millard et al., 2021). This indirect pathway challenges outcome-driven assessments of support initiatives and confirms that sociocultural engagement serves as a developmental bridge to academic performance.

Extending Adjustment Frameworks: Integration as Negotiated and Structured

These findings challenge the prevailing resilience-based narratives of international student adaptation (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Bertram et al., 2014). Academic performance remained strongly associated with prior attainment, confirming the cumulative nature of academic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, qualitative evidence indicates that performance gains depend not only on ability but also on learning to interpret institutional norms (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Success was shaped by access to relational and structural resources as much as by individual effort.

Furthermore, the negative association between pre-sessional participation and grades should be interpreted cautiously. Rather than signaling program limitations, it may reflect uneven starting positions. Students requiring additional

preparation often entered with heightened uncertainty extending beyond language proficiency (Christidis, 2021). Without continued discipline-specific mentoring, early vulnerability may persist, suggesting that sociocultural engagement may need to be sustained beyond initial orientation.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that integration is negotiated between student agency and institutional structure (Jones, 2017). Students demonstrated persistence and adaptability, yet their trajectories were shaped by the timing of engagement opportunities, the availability of peer networks, and institutional responsiveness. Adaptation therefore emerges less as a linear psychological adjustment and more as a relational process embedded within structured sociocultural environments (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019; Bilecen et al., 2023).

Practical Implications: Timing, Continuity, and Institutional Capacity

These findings offer several practical implications for higher education institutions. First, interventions may be most effective if phased rather than concentrated solely at entry. Orientation activities are important, but students appear most receptive to sociocultural engagement once academic norms are partially understood. Sustained pathways—particularly during Term 2, when academic stress often intensifies—can complement initial orientation and support continued adjustment more effectively than front-loaded activities.

Second, pre-sessional provision could be more closely aligned with first-term academic mentoring. Language preparation, when paired with ongoing, contextualized guidance, can help students interpret academic expectations with greater confidence.

Third, well-being strategies should extend beyond formal counseling services. Consistent with research highlighting stigma and low uptake among Chinese students (Cao et al., 2016), participants in this study relied heavily on peer networks. Embedding community-building initiatives within academic and sociocultural spaces can normalize help-seeking through peer mentoring and culturally responsive messaging (Ma, 2026).

Fourth, if integration unfolds in phases, staff development should reflect this sequencing. Training in intercultural communication and inclusive pedagogy can move beyond general awareness-raising to equip academic staff to recognize early-stage academic decoding challenges and scaffold relational confidence within classroom design (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Landorf et al., 2023). Strengthening these capacities may help institutional initiatives move from peripheral activities to structurally embedded support.

Finally, informal intercultural spaces can be considered integral to institutional design rather than optional enhancements (Fuentes et al., 2021). Their value lies in supporting identity negotiation, intercultural competence, and confidence—capacities that underpin both academic engagement and longer-term professional development.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted within a single institutional context, and the sample was not evenly distributed across student categories, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while participants are often grouped under the term “international student,” such categories—typically defined by legal status or nationality—can mask the diverse positionalities, identities, and intersectional experiences of students (Huang, 2022).

While the phased model is analytically useful, further longitudinal research is needed to examine how these stages unfold across different institutional settings and national cohorts. Future studies could also explore how macro-level factors—such as immigration policies, financial constraints, and global political dynamics (Li et al., 2026)—interact with institutional structures to shape individual adjustment processes, particularly in the post-pandemic context.

CONCLUSION

While confirming established findings around belonging and peer support, this study advances international student scholarship by foregrounding timing, sequencing, and informal institutional spaces as central mechanisms of adaptation. Integration does not appear to involve the parallel accumulation of academic, sociocultural, and well-being gains. Rather, it unfolds in stages in which interpretive clarity and relational security gradually enable academic confidence and intercultural engagement.

For universities, this suggests a shift from one-off, resilience-focused interventions toward phased, developmentally aligned sociocultural support embedded across the student journey. When institutions attend to timing, relational infrastructure, and staff capacity, they create conditions in which international students can move from uncertainty toward greater academic agency and, ultimately, toward a more secure sense of belonging.

By cultivating environments that validate diverse identities through systemic, equity-oriented approaches, institutions not only improve student outcomes but also enhance their global mission, contributing to more inclusive and globally responsive higher education systems.

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