

Understanding the Chinese international student experiences, expectations, challenges, and support interventions in UK higher education: A literature review

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Abstract

The number of Chinese international students at universities in the UK has soared in recent years (HESA, 2023), making it essential to understand their experiences abroad and address the challenges they face. This literature review focuses on the experiences of Chinese international students in the UK by exploring three main aspects: (1) their expectations, (2) challenges, and (3) targeted interventions by higher education institutes. The aim is to understand, empathise with, and improve the overall experience of Chinese international students in the UK. This literature review indicates that students' expectations and challenges are mainly interconnected in terms of academic success, career prospects, and personal growth. Universities in the UK provide academic, psychological, and career support to address these challenges according to students' needs. However, several gaps remain, particularly regarding the nuanced impacts of racism, individual personality traits, and gender differences on Chinese students' experiences, which can be looked into to further improve the learning and living experiences of Chinese international students in the UK and other English-speaking Western countries.

Keywords: *Chinese students, international students, higher education, student expectations, student challenges, university interventions*

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Introduction

There is a growing trend of Chinese international students moving to attend higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. China has sent more students to the UK than any other overseas country (HESA, 2023). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there was a significant presence of Chinese international students in the UK for the 2021/22 academic year, with 27% of all non-EU students coming from China. The number of international students from China has increased by 44,475 or 41% over the five-year period from 2017/18 to 2021/22 (HESA, 2023), highlighting China's pivotal role as the largest undergraduate and postgraduate international market for UK HEIs. Given significant inward mobility, students coming to study in the UK, it is crucial to understand the experiences of Chinese international students to enhance their academic outcomes and support their integration into a new academic and cultural environment. This understanding will help the UK HEIs maintain their position and reputation as a destination of choice for international students from China, measuring up to the expectations set by the institutions' significant tuition and fees.

This literature review explores three main areas: (1) the expectations of Chinese international students in the UK HEIs, (2) challenges faced in their study, and (3) targeted interventions by HEIs for Chinese international students to enhance their learning experience in the UK. By reviewing existing research and literature in these areas, the aim is to enhance the educational experience of Chinese international students in the UK, further identifying gaps, improving practice, and informing future research in this field that brings globally inclusive recruitment activities to UK HEIs. By understanding the expectations, challenges, and targeted interventions pertinent to this student demographic, educators, university management and policymakers can develop more tailored approaches to support academic success and foster a more

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inclusive and supportive learning environment for Chinese international students. This review not only speaks to the UK context, but offers insights about broader international themes across other English-speaking Western countries. This literature review explores the impact of the enrolment of Chinese international students in light of how this may be relevant to an international setting.

Chinese International Students' Expectations of UK HEIs

Chinese international students have multifaceted expectations of UK HEIs, encompassing the ability of the HEIs to pave the way for academic success, employability and career prospects upon graduation, alongside personal growth. By understanding these expectations, British universities can tailor their programmes to better meet the needs and aspirations of Chinese international students.

Academic Success

Chinese international students have high expectations for academic success when studying abroad. This is rooted in Confucian culture, which emphasises education as a pathway to upward social mobility, and educational achievement which is attainable through hard work (Li & Xie, 2020). Besides, many Chinese international students are forced to seek alternative pathways for higher education due to the highly competitive entrance into top Chinese universities via the national exam “Gaokao.” Studying in post-industrial, English-speaking countries like the UK offer them access to promising educational facilities and an inclusive academic environment. This appeals to students who are keen to delve into their fields of interest. According to Iannelli and Huang (2013), there was an increase in the number of Chinese international students who obtained a first-class degree in UK higher education, indicating the dedication of students to academic success.

Employability and Career Prospects upon Graduation

Many Chinese students believe that obtaining a degree from a prestigious UK university will enhance their employability and career prospects. Bamber (2014) agrees that a one-year master's programme is the main driving force for Chinese international students, providing the competitive edge for early and mid-career stages. Employers in China often regard international degrees as a testament to a candidate's global perspective and language proficiency, which are highly sought after in the competitive job market. Furthermore, there are extant gender-based tensions in the workplace in China. Female Chinese international students regard one way to minimise gender bias is to study abroad for a brief period, meaning a one-year master's degree in the UK allows students to enter the workforce sooner. This gives them a head start in their careers compared with peers who pursue a three-year postgraduate degree in China (Zhao & Cox, 2022).

Personal Growth

Many Chinese international students are motivated by the desire for personal growth and development. According to Bamber (2014), students seek opportunities to challenge themselves not just academically but also in developing soft skills, including enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Beyond academic content, the experience of living and studying in the UK provides valuable life skills. Studying abroad offers Chinese students the chance to live independently. Some students see learning experience in the UK as a catalyst for personal development. They express aspirations of developing an improved, 'imagined' future self through their UK educational experience (Consoli, 2024).

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Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students in the UK

While the UK provides a range of new opportunities and unique experiences compared to their home country, Chinese international students often face numerous challenges that can impact their academic performance, social integration, and psychological wellbeing. Understanding the challenges faced by Chinese students studying in the UK is essential for universities to develop effective and targeted support systems.

Academic Challenges

Students' satisfaction with their programmes of study is largely dependent on the academic challenges they face. The following sections explore the academic challenges specifically faced by international Chinese students.

Language Barrier

Chinese students identify language as their most significant challenge, particularly when learning unfamiliar subject-specific terminologies. Even though the majority of students have an academically acceptable command of English for course admissions, including high scores in language proficiency exams like IELTS, they still experience anxiety and shyness that impede their participation in class discussions. This anxiety stems from the fear of making mistakes and “losing face,” which is a cultural concern about how they are being perceived by peers and instructors (Zhu & O’ Sullivan, 2022). As a result, they prefer to remain silent in class discussions to avoid potential embarrassment and disrupting the class (Zhu & O’ Sullivan, 2022). These findings were based on informal focus group discussions, participant observations and in-depth interviews with Chinese students studying in the UK.

A Different Education System

There are notable differences in teaching models between China and the UK. British universities encourage active participation and teamwork in the classroom. With the guidance of an academic staff member, students are often encouraged to discuss and work together to provide solutions to a problem, by looking into a range of resources recommended, and incorporating critical thinking and autonomous learning. This “problem-posing” model is proposed by Freire (1968), whereby students are encouraged to recognise their relationship with the world, developing the skills for critical thinking and making decisions (Maylor, 2022).

In contrast, Chinese education tends to adopt traditional passive learning, through bestowing knowledge through lectures, followed by individual assignment completion (Chen, 2016). The action of bestowing knowledge coincides with the “banking” concept of education, introduced by Freire (1968), whereby he equated teachers with bank clerks and saw them as “depositing” knowledge and information into students rather than stimulating discussions amongst them. Consequently, Chinese international students often find it difficult to adapt to group discussions and collaborative projects, although they generally feel more used to listening to lectures and writing essays (Zhong et al., 2020).

Different Assessment Methods

Different assessment methods in the UK also pose challenges to Chinese international students. Chinese international students are accustomed to high stakes written examinations, whereas UK universities often use a combination of essays, projects, presentations, and group work to calculate the year average (Turner, 2006). More recently, Dai (2023) has suggested that Chinese international students are surprised by the variety of assessment formats in UK HEIs. They require more familiarity with the assessment formats, expected answers and marking criteria

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to perform well in these assignments. In our experience, thorough briefing on the assessments, examples of answers in formative assessments and assessment grids to show what is required from the students are useful to addressing this challenge. In addition to that, another challenge voiced by Chinese international students is to express themselves in proper academic English under time constraints, especially in assessments requiring critical thinking (Dai, 2023). This calls for more formative exercises and pairing with peers who have a better command of English.

Social Challenges

Chinese international students face a myriad of social challenges when studying in the UK. These challenges broadly encompass cultural adjustment, social integration, and experiences of discrimination and stereotyping.

Cultural Adjustment

British culture differs from what Chinese international students are accustomed to, leading to cultural shock. When Chinese international students first begin to study in the UK, the anxiety they experience stems from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. This adjustment period can be stressful for students away from home (Zhu & O' Sullivan, 2022). Many of the Chinese international students face difficulty in sociocultural adjustment. For example, while they may be satisfied with the physical conditions of their accommodation, the social environment of their accommodation presents an issue for them, particularly the noise (loud music and shouting by people who are intoxicated) and the mess in the kitchen (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Students who live with a host family indicate other difficulties, such as holding conversations with the host family because of the language barrier and cultural differences (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

Social Integration

Chinese international students often struggle to build social relationships with local British students due to cultural and linguistic differences. Instead, they tend to interact more with students from overseas, who are of other nationalities. With these students there are fewer cultural differences and they can resonate more deeply with their shared international education experiences. Their most developed social network is reported to be with Chinese co-nationals, who can provide emotional support and practical help for each other (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017) conducted further research detailing other individual factors that significantly contribute to the lack of social integration among Chinese international students. Personal motivation was identified as a key factor, with some students prioritising academic achievement over social interactions. Many interviewees in this research argued that forming friendships with foreigners was unnecessary because Chinese international students often choose to remain within their own groups. Additionally, personal qualities of students affect their social integration. Open-mindedness and extroversion were seen as facilitating better integration, whereas introverted students struggled more.

Discrimination and Stereotypes

Discrimination and stereotyping present another challenge for Chinese international students. Many students experience subtle forms of racism and stereotyping (Yu et al., 2023). After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian, especially anti-Chinese sentiment, was exacerbated, leading to hate crimes and microaggressions towards Chinese people (He et al., 2020). Furthermore, East Asian students are frequently subjected to three pervasive stereotypes: (1) lacking critical thinking skills, (2) being more inclined to engage in plagiarism, and (3) contributing to a decline in the quality of Western higher education (Moosavi, 2022). Through

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qualitative semi-structured interview data, it was found that these misunderstandings and negative experiences have contributed to increased sadness, anxiety and loneliness among Chinese international students (Yu & Moskal, 2018).

Psychological Challenges

The combination of academic pressures and social isolation often results in psychological stress. Based on 54 interviews with Chinese students from 13 universities across the UK about the psychological challenges they faced, it has been reported that compared to domestic Chinese student populations, Chinese international students experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Yu et al., 2023).

Stress and Anxiety

Wang (2018) employed a mixed methods approach, utilising both interviews and questionnaires, to investigate the academic adjustment of Chinese international students who had been studying in the UK for over three years. The data revealed that acclimatising to academic life was their primary concern in their first year here. Chinese international students felt less confident, and their anxiety spiked when they spoke up in public or interacted with local students due to perceived lower speaking ability compared to their first language. Although language barriers were reduced over time, such that students can understand lectures, vocalise ideas in classes and produce well-structured academic writing, particularly at the postgraduate level, other challenges persisted. Students found that it was difficult and stressful to study and conduct research independently without explicit instructions from academic members of staff. Apart from stress related to academic life, going to social events was reported to be the second most difficult and stressful experience for students. Students experience increased stress not just in making friends with

British peers as previously discussed, but also in maintaining good relationships with their module tutors and research supervisors.

The Absence of a Sense of Belonging

As established above, Chinese international students have felt disconnected from both social and academic communities at UK universities. Many of them indicate a lack of social belonging because they have not integrated into the social circles around them. Consequently, they are unable to fully enjoy their study abroad experience or develop meaningful relationships with local students. They have felt detached from their courses, subject disciplines, and professional communities. Many Chinese students who struggle with writing academic assignments, regardless of their field of study, can feel further disconnected due to poor performance, which further discouraged them from engaging and enjoying their learning (O'Dea, 2024).

Targeted Interventions by HEIs for Chinese Students

Current empirical research has shown that many Chinese international students are having to cope with social issues such as culture shock, linguistic barriers, educational disparities, racial discrimination, and mental health concerns (Wang et al., 2025). These forms of disparity will need to be tackled.

Academic Support

One of the primary academic interventions by UK HEIs is the provision of language support services. Many UK universities provide paid pre-sessional English courses and free language workshops. These courses aim to enhance students' language proficiency, enabling students to transition smoothly into UK higher education. These intensive courses expose students to English terminologies tailored to academic contexts, equipping students with the linguistic skills

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necessary to succeed in their respective courses (Thorpe et al., 2023). In addition, many universities also offer workshops on critical thinking, essay writing, and research methodologies tailored to the needs of international students. These workshops help bridge the gap between educational practices in China and the expectations in UK HEIs (Turner, 2006). Study skills workshops are also integral components of academic support services provided by UK universities. They cover time management, note-taking, exam preparation, and study strategies to equip international students with essential skills for academic success. These workshops are often well-received, with high attendance rates among Chinese international students who seek to improve their academic performance and adapt to the UK education system.

Psychological Services

Many UK universities provide free psychological counselling services to ensure that all students, regardless of financial background, have access to mental health support, sharing coping strategies to help students manage stress, anxiety, and homesickness (Montgomery, 2010). These services typically include a certain number of free sessions per academic year, with the option for additional sessions if need. The availability of free counselling is essential to encourage Chinese international students to seek help without the additional burden of cost.

Career Advice Services

Beyond academic and psychological support, UK universities offer interventions aimed at fostering the employment of Chinese international students. Personalised career counselling sessions help students understand their strengths, career aspirations, and the UK job market. Advisors typically assist with CV writing, cover letter preparation, and interview techniques tailored to the needs of Chinese international students. Furthermore, universities frequently

organise employability workshops on essential skills such as networking, presenting, and job searching. (Li, 2012) found that apart from knowledge gained from subject content, students find other learning skills such as information analysis, research planning, presentation, and teamwork have enhanced their employability (Li, 2012). Additionally, these experiences have expanded their horizons, increased self-confidence, and improved their problem-solving skills, which they viewed as enhancing their career prospects (Li, 2012).

Discussion

Chinese students' views on academic success are complex and are linked to their expectations of teaching models. In agreement with the findings from Wang (2020) through open-ended surveys, Chinese students see learning as a means of maintaining family connectedness. Influenced by Confucian values, their parents heavily invest in their children's education, both financially and through efforts and guidance. This makes students feel obligated to meet parental expectations, but that also means more stress when studying abroad, particularly transitioning from a more exam-oriented learning environment to group discussions and collaborative projects with English native speakers (Wang, 2020). They also understand that education is crucial for future career prospects and economic wellbeing, and therefore, academic support from HEIs will be very helpful in easing the transition from a different teaching model and education system when studying abroad.

As established above, Chinese international students often grapple with a range of interconnected psychological problems, such as anxiety, loneliness, a lack of belonging, stereotypes, and poor social integration (Brandt et al., 2022). Programmes to promote positive social interactions and mutual understanding among students will help to enhance social integration and a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, diversity and inclusion initiatives can help reduce

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stereotyping and discrimination by increasing their peers' knowledge and awareness of different cultures and backgrounds. The mental health support services mentioned above, such as counseling and stress management programmes will help students develop coping strategies to deal with the anxiety associated with social isolation and discrimination. Where face-to-face interactions are limited, online platforms can also be used to facilitate social connections, to provide mental health resources, and to deliver anti-discrimination training to staff and students (Brandt et al., 2022).

Suggestions and Recommendations for Future Work

Several research gaps remain in this area that can help to improve the experience of Chinese international students in the UK, or in other countries. Firstly, racial discrimination and microaggressions faced by Chinese international students are often underexplored in the context of their impact on students' mental health and academic performance. According to Yu et al. (2023), racial microaggressions faced by Chinese international students are often dismissed or normalised, reflecting neo-racism and neo-orientalism within UK universities. This normalisation must be critically examined and addressed to reduce psychological stress of students and enhance their sense of belonging.

Another underexplored area is the role of individual personality traits in students' adaptation processes. A review of the literature typically generalises the challenges faced by Chinese international students without considering how personality differences affect their experiences and coping strategies. Understanding these individual differences, such as students with extroverted tendencies in comparison to more introverted students, is crucial for tailoring support services effectively.

There is also a lack of research on how gender influences the experiences of Chinese international students in the UK. Zhao and Cox (2022) suggested that female students may prefer shorter degree programmes abroad for career advancement, yet little research addresses the specific challenges and support needs of female Chinese students.

Furthermore, alumni and current students have reported a deficiency in resources related to the Chinese recruitment market and additional support mechanisms (e.g. mentoring) from career services. UK career services are also less informed and therefore less effective or useful for employment in China. For example, it has been reported that Chinese employers rarely utilise UK career websites for vacancies (Li, 2012).

Lastly, the satisfaction of Chinese international students studying in other popular study destinations, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, could be further explored. Aligning with work by Hattersley and Nicholson (2024), finding out whether the values sought by Chinese international students in the UK should also be extended to investigate other English-speaking Western countries. This would be useful to improve study experiences on an international scale.

These research gaps may become the focus of scholars in the near future. By exploring these gaps, UK universities can provide more helpful interventions, to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, thereby improving the learning experience of students in the UK even further.

Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the literature around how Chinese international students in UK universities experience this transition to pursuing their undergraduate or postgraduate degree. In this paper, we (the authors) focused on Chinese international students' expectations, the challenges they face, and the targeted interventions by UK HEIs. Chinese international students

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aspire for academic success, career prospects, and personal growth but face significant challenges such as language barriers, cultural adjustment issues, and social integration challenges. Discrimination and stereotypes further complicate their experiences, leading to psychological stress and isolation. The literature review also reveals an interplay between Chinese international students' expectations and the challenges they encounter in UK higher education. Their high expectations for academic success, rooted in Confucian values and the competitive nature of the Chinese education system, are met with significant academic challenges, while navigating concerns about employability and career prospects. The social challenges they face are also not to be overlooked. Although a few targeted interventions have been provided by UK universities to help Chinese international students quickly adapt to a new living and study environment, gaps remain in addressing the nuanced impacts of racism, personality traits, gender differences and targeted career support. Future research should focus on these areas to enhance the overall experience and support for Chinese international students in the UK for equitable outcomes.

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