

Navigating New Terrain: First-Year Chinese Students' Transitionary Experiences In a Sino-US Joint Venture University In China

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Abstract

The growth of international higher education, with an increase in inbound students and the creation of foreign university branch campuses, has made quality education available globally. But this also presents challenges for academic adjustment for international students. Although there is a significant amount of literature on the struggles faced by international students studying abroad, there is limited research on the challenges faced by students attending International Branch Campuses (IBCs) within their home countries. This study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative exploratory approach to understand the specific challenges faced by first-year university students in China at a Sino-US international branch campus. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups with 28 students, five faculty members, and three student support staff. The findings provide valuable insights into the institutional and teaching challenges faced by these students, which are different from those faced by international students studying abroad.

Keywords

academic adjustment, first-year, students, China, higher education, internationalization

Background

The internationalization of higher education has resulted in a transformation of the educational landscape and presents new difficulties for local students, particularly those enrolled in

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International Branch Campuses (IBCs) of foreign institutions within their home countries. Attending IBCs requires domestic students to adapt to complex situations at the individual, interpersonal, professional, and academic levels (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2022; Schartner & Young, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2021) students are faced with various challenges, such as navigating new surroundings, encountering unfamiliar instructors, adjusting to differing curricula and teaching methods (Dobosz & Hetmańczyk, 2023; Li et al., 2022).

Due to the numerous complex challenges faced by students during the transition from secondary education to university, acquiring a comprehensive set of new skills is essential for adapting to the demands of university life. The university's failure to provide adequate support for students to develop these skills can result in attrition, poor academic performance, and psychological difficulties (Li et al., 2018; Reddy et al., 2018). Previous research has primarily focused on the academic adaptation of university students in an international education context, specifically those studying in foreign countries, particularly in Europe and North America (Andrade & Fernandes, 2022; Li et al., 2017; Zhao & Ebanga de B'beri, 2022). Findings from these studies demonstrate the various ways in which foreign and unfamiliar learning environments can pose challenges to students' academic adjustment. While the academic adaptation of students studying abroad has received considerable attention (Che, 2023; Yu et al., 2021), there is a dearth of quality research on the academic adaptation of students studying at IBCs of foreign universities within their own country and specially in IBCs in China. These IBCs face the challenge of developing and implementing transition support strategies that meet the needs of first-year students from local high schools as they navigate their university experience. Hence, a new perspective that is grounded in the local context of host countries is necessary. Given China's efforts to internationalize its higher education through the establishment of IBCs, examining the academic challenges and coping mechanisms of local Chinese students as they acclimate to these IBCs cultures is a valuable endeavor that contributes to the success of student transition.

According to data from the Yang and Wu (2021), China is home to 131 IBCs serving the educational needs of 207,332 students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at these institutions. The IBCs function as joint venture institutions in partnership with a local entity or organization; for instance, Duke Kunshan University is partnered with Wuhan University, New York University Shanghai is joined with East China Normal University, Liverpool with Xi'an Jiaotong, and Kean University with the Zhejiang Province. This setup enables students to receive both a degree from the main campus of the international institution and a standard Chinese diploma upon graduation.

The student demographic in IBCs in China primarily consists of those from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Yang & Wu, 2021). These students aim to further their education abroad and seek intercultural learning opportunities and to improve their English language proficiency for future career advancement (Hu, 2019; Huang & Curle, 2021). However, a significant portion of enrollees come from students who performed poorly on the "Gaokao" exams and were unable to secure admission to reputable local universities (Yang & Wu, 2021). This unique student population and setting of IBCs in China provides a context for studying the academic adaptation of first-year students transitioning from Chinese high schools to IBCs of Anglophone institutions. Thus, the study aims to examine the academic challenges faced by first-year Chinese students at a Sino-American university's IBC in China and the coping mechanisms they employ to adjust academically, with the goal of recommending student transition support for IBCs in China.

The primary research questions comprise

1. What challenges do first-year students experience in their academic adaptation to university?

2. What strategies do first-year students employ to address academic adaptation challenges at university?

Theoretical Underpinning

Adjustment to university life is a complex and multilayered process. The process of adaptation is a dynamic and interactive one that occurs between the individual and their environment, with the goal of achieving a harmonious fit between the two (Liu et al., 2022). While it is an integrative process, it can be categorized into four distinct units such as academic adjustment (managing the academic demands of university), social adjustment (establishing relationships with peers and staff, participating in social activities on campus), personal and emotional adjustment (maintaining psychological and physiological wellbeing, experiencing a sense of calm and stability), and institutional attachment (the student's feelings and satisfaction towards their university) (Baker & Siryk, 1984). In particular, for academic adjustment, Baker and Siryk's (1984) emphasized the importance of having a clear academic goal, being motivated to learn, prioritizing academic work, making a concerted effort to manage academic demands, and experiencing satisfaction with the academic environment as important components of academic adjustment. While these indicators are standard and comprehensive descriptors of students' academic adjustment, they lack the component of cross-cultural adaptation which is highly significant for the students studying in cultural (social and educational) different from their own.

Cross-cultural adaptation in general used to describe the transformation that individuals undergo in order to be able to operate effectively in a culture that is unfamiliar to them (Ng et al., 2017). In the context of the current study, the academic adaptation of students enrolled at IBC in China can explained by considering the stages involved in cross-cultural adaptation process. For this purpose, we ground our study on Anderson's (1994) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model.

The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model is defined as the long-term result of many shorter-term adjustments (Anderson, 1994). The model posits that learning during adjustment is a result of the interplay between emotions and cognitions, which then drive associated actions. The model emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in adjustment, where adjustment and learning are seen as interrelated and cyclical. Anderson's model has four main components: the initial "cultural encounter," followed by "obstacles" in the environment or self, leading to the generation of various "responses" in the third stage, and finally, the "overcoming" phase in which adjustment is typically reached. All four stages involve affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Therefore, the definition put forth by Cheng and Fox (2008) holds particular significance in the context of this study, as it captures the essence of the phenomenon. According to Cheng and Fox (2008), academic adaptation can be viewed as "the dynamic processes of linguistic and culturally diverse students engaging in the academic study" (p. 309).

For this study, we conceptualize academic adjustment as the ability of first-year college students to successfully navigate their new and culturally and linguistically distinct educational environment and effectively cope with its academic demands. The successful navigating process refers to how students acquire knowledge and skills, essentially expanding their resources for coping with the demands of their academic environment (Yu et al., 2021).

The Significance of Academic Adaptation in Culturally Distinct Environment

Academic adaptation is a key component in the overall adjustment process for students studying at foreign universities (Li et al., 2022) or at IBCs as this adjustment is compounded by acculturation stress. The transition from high school to college or university represents a significant shift in a

student's life, particularly in instances where the institution is located in a foreign country and/or the cultural and academic environment is unfamiliar (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2022) even in their country. The critical challenges faced by these students include managing a diverse curriculum with a complicated course arrangement, becoming familiar with various forms of assessment methods, encountering instructors with different teaching philosophies, and interacting with new peers (Andrade & Fernandes, 2022; Li et al., 2017; Pownall et al., 2022).

A rapid acclimation to the college/university setting during the initial year is predictive of a favorable campus experience and has an impact on academic success (Yu et al., 2021). However, adaptation challenges can hamper or decelerate the acclimation process. Therefore, the studies on academic adaptation challenges of international students studying abroad are abundant in the literature (Lashari et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021) to guide university framework for the adjustment of international students. However, given the fundamental difference in the context between international students (students who go abroad to study) and students at IBCs (students' studying in their own country but at foreign instruction), scholars, in recent years, have investigated academic experiences of students studying at IBCs. For example, Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) studied students studying at IBCs in UAE focusing on students' learning experiences and classroom resources. Similarly, Ahmad (2015) examined learning experiences of the students studying at 11 IBCs in Malaysia which focus on quality of instruction, expertise of lecturers, curriculum, and institutional functioning.

The existing literature has several substantial limitations that it either pertain to students enrolled as international students in foreign countries or study learning experiences of students enrolled at IBCs rather than their academic adaptation challenges. Moreover, the studies on IBCs students primarily are from outside of China and do not specifically address the transition of first-year students from high school to university. The literature has neglected to examine the transition of students to a foreign university campus within their home country, resulting in a significant gap that requires further investigation.

The Study Context

The present study was conducted at a Sino-US joint venture university located in a southern province of China. This collaboration between a public university based in the United States and the local city government resulted in a unique campus setting. As one of the earliest American-based universities to enter the Chinese market, there is limited information available on students' academic adaptability to the university. With a student body of approximately 4500 students across all levels of study in China, the university offers 20 undergraduate programs within four colleges and seven graduate programs, including a doctoral program in Education Leadership.

The university employs approximately 200 international faculty members from 35 countries across North and South America, Europe, Africa, South Asia and East-Asia, Middle East and Africa, while the majority of administrative and support staff members are Chinese nationals. The university mirrors the curriculum (teaching contents and course requirements of 120 credits) offered at the US campus, and participates in the US accreditation process, indicating consistency in the design and delivery of student learning experiences between the USA and Chinese campuses. The undergraduate student recruitment procedure is consistent with the application procedure of the home campus; however, Gaokao scores are also considered. Students' English language requirements for admission consist of Duolingo 100 or TOEFL 110.

Methodology

In this study, we utilized exploratory qualitative research methodologies. Such methods are deemed valuable and appropriate when the primary objective is to comprehend a phenomenon or issue, refine the definition of the problem, or in instances of uncertainty in the understanding of the potential phenomenon (Cresswell, 2017; Dicé & Zoena, 2017; Jain, 2021).

Participants and Sampling

During the spring of 2022, an invitation for voluntary participation was dispatched by faculty advisors to the incoming First-Year students of the fall 2022 cohort. A total of 28 students, consisting of 16 females and 12 males from three distinct colleges (College of Liberal arts, College of Science, Mathematics, and Technology and College of Business and Public management) consented to take part in the interviews. The average GPA of student participants at the time of interview was 3.1 (sd = .94) and their reported score on Duolingo was above 100.

To gather a comprehensive understanding of the students' responses and for triangulation purposes, three university staff members (two college officers and one student affairs representative) and five faculty members who primarily instruct First-Year students were recruited.

Data Collection and Procedure

The main data collection technique employed was a combination of semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews with all participants sourced from multiple perspectives, complemented by a focus group discussion with the student participants. The interview and focus group schedule followed the pyramid model (Yudhistir, 2022), which involved the researchers starting with pre-determined questions outlined in the interview protocol and delving deeper into each response to obtain a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences. The interview protocol consisted of questions regarding the participants' background information and motivation for attending the particular IBCs, the primary challenges encountered during the first year of study, and the coping strategies employed to overcome these challenges. The faculty and staff interview questions were generated based on the student data collected. The interviews with all participants were conducted in English and took place in the faculty lounge, while the student focus group was held in an available classroom, each lasting between 30–45 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed utilizing thematic analysis (TA) with an inductive approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis method in the social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Braun et al., 2017) and the inductive approach allows researchers to draw closer to the data, uncovering themes that address research questions. This approach was deemed most appropriate for this study as the aim was to identify themes in the data that were previously unknown in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted with three students, which supplemented the interview data findings and added new issues and perspectives (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). Participants were asked to engage in brainstorming and reach a consensus on the topic areas discussed. After the focus group discussion was concluded, the findings were further refined to arrive at the final results.

To enhance the credibility of this study, a data triangulation technique was employed. Data triangulation is a method used to improve the validity and reliability of research findings

(Patton, 2002) and involves the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 1999).

Findings

The findings related to challenges are presented in two primary themes, each comprising two sub-categories. This is followed by the findings on coping strategies presented under two main themes: interpersonal and institutional.

Institutional Challenges

Faculty Diversity. The country of origin of faculty members greatly influenced their identity as instructors, impacting cultural practices such as accent and communication style as well as their teaching philosophy regarding “how learning occurs.” The language of instruction at the Sino-US campus is English, thus stringent admission criteria are implemented to guarantee that students possess above-average English proficiency. However, students reported that the multitude of foreign accents employed by instructors could be confusing and intimidating. One student noted, “During the initial months, I struggled to comprehend most of the lectures due to the multitude of diverse English speaking styles used by the instructors.”

The student affairs personnel corroborated the student’s predicament, “At times students are overwhelmed with the professors coming from different countries with different accents.” Another student elaborated on how he initially struggled with different accents but has adapted since his initial days at the university:

Three of my professors came from three different countries and spoke in different accents, which confused me...Before coming here, I had never spoken to a foreigner; I only heard them speak in movies, and most spoke in a similar accent. Here, it was like everyone spoke a different type of English. But now, I am getting used to different accents and can understand most of what they say.

One faculty participant who had previously taught Chinese students in her home country stated, “Teaching in an Anglophone country where most faculty and students have similar English speaking styles can facilitate a quicker adjustment for students.”

The diversity of university faculty also presents the challenge of differing native cultures and personal educational philosophies. Some professors favored informal interactions that made some Chinese students feel uncomfortable. One student reported lingering discomfort from such experiences:

Most of my professors encourage us to call them by their names, which I cannot do. Professors are like my parents, and (I) cannot imagine calling them by name. A few professors do not care what we call them, but (others) like professors (Name) insist that I use his name. I cannot do it and I will not do it in the future.

The students were in awe of their school teachers, who they never expected to be their friends. “Initially, I was uneasy about addressing my professors by their first names, as it is not a common practice among Chinese students,” said a student who came from another province to pursue her studies. While some faculty members fostered informal and friendly interactions, others had strict requirements. “For Chinese students, WeChat is a convenient means of instant communication, but some professors do not like to share their contact information,” reported one student. Another

student noted, “I have to schedule appointments to discuss my questions as some professors do not allow for questions outside of class or office hours.”

The students were accustomed to learning from Chinese teachers who shared similar languages, cultures, and practices. Thus, the introduction of diverse teaching styles and expectations proved to be a challenge. “I had four teachers, each from a different country, each with their own unique teaching style and expectations from students,” reported one student when describing his initial academic challenges. The difference in teaching style was a matter of concern for another student who had this to say:

My teachers often had conflicting opinions; for example, one teacher encouraged us to ask questions during the lecture while another did not want to be disturbed and we could only ask questions after she was done.

The marking policies of the professors were also inconsistent, which was another concern. “I think there should be a common marking system for all professors. We suspect that two professors gave us marks even without reading our assignment,” as reported by one of the students.

Academic Policies. The students faced a recurring challenge in adapting to the academic policies, including earning credits for both Chinese and US degrees, comprehending the 4-year plan requirements, selecting electives from available course options, and navigating the course registration system. One student stated, “I was aware that I would be studying at an American university and the degree requirements would differ, but I did not expect to have to fulfill requirements for a Chinese diploma.” Another student mentioned, “Our four-year plan did not include Chinese requirements, which made determining what was necessary rather confusing.” During the first semester, several first-year students expressed confusion regarding their understanding of the 4-year plan, with one student in the focus group offering a more detailed explanation:

Each first-year student is assigned a dedicated advisor to guide us through the four-year plan, but since I did not understand the plan initially, I think I made some poor choices even before meeting my advisor. The plan appears clear and straightforward, but this is not the case; several courses have prerequisites that I have failed to understand.

In the same context, student participants shared their concerns about choosing electives. One student noted that the limited number of electives available during their first year was problematic. “I had difficulty distinguishing between humanities and social sciences courses, and despite sending multiple emails, the office was unable to provide assistance,” the student stated. Another participant reported feelings of being overwhelmed by the abundance of course options, explaining, “it was a new concept for my faculty advisor, and I struggled to make a decision.” The complexity of the program was also a point of concern for students in the focus group. As one student expressed, “I’m not sure why the program has to be so complex.”

Students also shared their concerns about using the course registration system and tracking their progress. One student said in the interview:

I would need one on one sessions to understand that system; I am already anxious about when the course registration will begin next semester and if I will be able to register successfully.

Participants from the academic development department also supported this finding. According to her:

I spend most days attending to first-year concerns such as the inability to choose an elective that I refer to the faculty advisor. Several first-year students panic in the second semester, as most courses are based on the number of credits earned by senior cohorts. I wish that they would not panic or understand the system.

Pedagogical Challenges

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. The transition to university life for the Chinese students was characterized by significant cultural and educational differences, which resulted in an initial period of shock for many of them. According to one of the respondents, “I was aware that studying at a foreign university would bring some differences in the learning environment, but the reality was beyond my expectations.”

The students were accustomed to a rigid and structured timetable in their schools, but the flexible and unconventional timetable at the Sino-US universities proved to be a significant change in the learning environment. A student reported, “I was taken aback by the schedule that included a class starting at 8:30 AM and ending at 7:00 PM.”

In their schools, the students were used to a highly structured and teacher-centered learning approach. However, at the university, they were expected to engage in active learning and participate in discussions. This transition was challenging for some students, who reported feeling intimidated by the prospect of reading articles and presenting in front of the class. Another student noted, “I was surprised to learn that we would have to rely on lectures and independent research to complete assignments, rather than having textbooks to refer to.”

The professors recognized that the students were transitioning from a structured, teacher-centered learning environment and had limited experience in independent learning encouraged by the university. One professor noted:

Students do not understand that this is no longer a school, and they have to do the majority of their own learning. Of course, I will guide them, but that is all I will do; I will not plan their education for them.

Students were often intimidated by the various forms of formative assessments that were used in the university, such as case studies, essays, and group projects. These assessment methods were often new to the students and required them to put in extra effort to understand the requirements and complete them successfully. Additionally, a student reported, “I had never encountered such complex assignments before, and it took me a significant amount of time and effort to understand and complete them.” The student affairs personnel echoed this sentiment, acknowledging the difficulties students faced with the assignment,

Students trust paper-pencil tests that have a clear measurable rubric. They did not prefer activity-based or formative assessments. Especially the one with holistic rubrics.

Given the Covid challenge, several students had to take online classes that supplemented their challenges in the American curriculum. One student said,

I had to write Discussion Questions (DQs) for three online classes almost daily. I did not understand the value of that assignment and how the faculty was involved in the assignment; I did not know if I learned something or did it right.

Students faced challenges with the policy of late submissions, which incurred a reduction in points for each day that it was submitted past the due date. One student stated, “It was a new rule

for me; in my first year, I did not fully comprehend or take it seriously, resulting in deductions for late submissions.” Additionally, students experienced difficulties understanding the academic integrity policy and utilizing plagiarism checking software such as Turnitin and Safe-Assign. One student mentioned,

I was in trouble because I didn’t put double quotes for quotations, and my similarity index was so high that the professor lodged my name with the academic integrity committee.

Educational Technology. The students expressed the challenges they faced related to educational technology, which initially came as a surprise. The students highlighted that their prior educational experience in most Chinese high schools did not involve the use of electronic devices or internet access for teaching and learning. This presented a challenge for them in transitioning from a traditional paper-based learning method to digital learning. One student stated, “I was accustomed to using technology for personal purposes, but I had never utilized it for academic purposes before enrolling in the university. This caused me to feel nervous about organizing my notes and readings effectively.” The students also reported difficulties in learning to navigate online library resources. Additionally, the students faced challenges in adapting to the use of web tools that were either unfamiliar or unavailable in their prior educational experience in China. One student shared,

Professors in most classes use several web-based tools and resources. Learning to use them was challenging initially. I missed many quizzes in the beginning because I had never used that app before. Learning to use these apps took me considerable time and effort.

Students also expressed concerns about their ability to use the learning management system.

After the first semester, I realized I did not have to carry any notebooks or pens to class; everything needed to be done through Blackboard, the learning management system. I struggled to use it, especially for online quizzes.

The student support personnel, when asked to elaborate on the technology-related issues faced by the students, explained the following:

Using technological gadgets is not a real challenge for students; putting them to study is stressful for them. Some students still preferred paper-based studies. Second, most students are unfamiliar with educational web tools such as Kahoot and Menti, since they have never used them in school, and the ability to use them becomes challenging for them.

Coping Mechanism

Interpersonal Resources. The students reported utilizing interpersonal resources as a coping mechanism, with two main sources being senior students and professors. Nearly all students reported that their greatest support came from senior students at the university. Many students stated that they had reached out to senior students prior to enrolling, with one student stating, “I had contact with a sophomore student who provided valuable information about the university even before I started, which greatly aided me.” Another student echoed this sentiment, noting, “Upon receiving my admission letter, I visited the university and spoke with several students. They were welcoming and offered tips that proved invaluable during my first few weeks.” Students typically turned to senior students for guidance when encountering difficulties, with one

student expressing, "My seniors never let me down and always went above and beyond to guide and assist me, not only with academic matters but also with personal issues."

Most students reported that their professors were friendly and approachable, which helped them feel at ease. One student stated, "From the first day, I found my professors to be warm and friendly. They always answered my messages and emails, and motivated and assisted me when needed." She also mentioned that her professor was always willing to meet with her outside of office hours, even responding to her messages and emails at unusual times.

The professors themselves were aware of the difficulties that new students might face in adapting to university life, and they were willing to go the extra mile to help. They were mindful of cultural differences between China and their home countries, and they made an effort to accommodate these differences. One professor reported, "This university is a foreign collaboration, so students may face additional challenges, and I am always ready to help them adjust."

The rapport established between professors and students resulted in a significant reduction of tension. A student remarked that the professors were not only knowledgeable but also friendly and personable, stating: "The professors have become our friends, engaging in conversations and activities that go beyond academics. They are approachable and fun to be around." The sentiment was echoed by the professors themselves, with one professor remarking that upon their arrival, the students appeared to be initially overwhelmed and uncertain, but were pleasantly surprised to find that their professors were also friends. The professor further noted that this informal relationship helped to alleviate the students' confusion and provided them with a more relaxed and welcoming environment.

Institutional Resources. The students and faculty members held the belief that the comprehensive orientation program offered at the start of the semester by the university played a crucial role in supporting the academic adjustment of students. A student who participated in the Pre-university Intensive English Program (PIEP) program commented, "The PIEP program was instrumental in providing me with the language support I needed to succeed in my classes. It also helped me become aware of the various logistical resources available to students." Another student emphasized the helpfulness of the library and its online resources, stating, "The library's online contents were invaluable in completing my assignments, as the textbook material alone was not sufficient."

The personnel of the student affairs department explained the arrangement the university had in place for new students. She reported:

We have an elaborate orientation program and separate personnel to address different issues. For example, if students have personal problems, there is someone to help them, or when students have issues related to language, we have people to support them and help them enroll in extra English programs. Even after they are here, we constantly keep in touch with them and offer help whenever needed

Students highlighted the role of one credit course, "transition to (the university)," which helped them acquire university transition-related skills to some extent. One student said:

When I look back now, I can see the value of the Transition to (the university) course. However, I wish that besides regular self-management skills; they could teach us more about the university culture, American curriculum, etc.

The students, who participated in face-to-face interviews, emphasized the support provided by the counseling center. One student stated, "Although usage of the counseling center may not be

frequent, it has been reported that it can be relied upon during times of stress, as communicated by those who have utilized its services.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the unique academic adaptation challenges and coping strategies of first-year students at a Sino-US joint venture university in China, with the ultimate goal of informing university administration and faculty in devising effective support strategies for the successful transition of these students to the IBCs context.

The study aimed to expand understanding of the academic adaptation challenges faced by first-year students in a Sino-US joint venture university in China. Through exploring these challenges and the coping strategies utilized by these students, the study aimed to provide recommendations for the university administration and faculty to develop effective support strategies for the successful academic transition of these students. The findings are unique in that they highlight the specific academic adaptation challenges faced by students who choose to pursue a foreign degree while staying in their own country. The results indicate that these challenges are context-specific and distinct from those commonly reported in the literature on academic challenges faced by East Asian students studying abroad. For example, themes such as a lack of social, peer, and institutional support, as well as English language challenges for social interaction, homesickness, and isolation, are often reported as challenges faced by international students (Kitchen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2017). However, these themes were not evident in the current study. Instead, the recurring theme was related to faculty diversity and its various factors, such as English accent, native culture, and educational philosophy.

The challenges faced in the present study differ from those commonly reported by international students pursuing degrees in Anglophone countries. This discrepancy arises from the relative homogeneity of faculty members, peers, and support staff in these countries, who possess a shared culture and accent. However, IBCs sets itself apart by hiring faculty from diverse countries, contributing to cultural and accent diversity, as similarly documented in studies conducted on IBCs in other countries that recruit visiting faculty globally (Lashari et al., 2018). Another factor contributing to the uniqueness of these challenges lies in the local student body, which predominantly dominates classes and academic environments, further reinforcing a familiar classroom culture. Therefore, the faculty and student populations reinforce a familiar classroom culture. However, in the current study, the faculty attempted to establish a new, unfamiliar classroom culture, resulting in adjustment difficulties for the students. An instance of these difficulties was the awkwardness experienced by students when proposed to address professors by their first names. It can be attributed to the teacher-student dichotomy and the values of respect and humility (Kaur, 2020) common to Chinese education system.

The challenges experienced by students in their pedagogical pursuits at IBCs are rooted in the establishment of new classroom cultures, which feature diverse faculty members instructing a homogenous student population. As highlighted in the literature, the instructional strategies and assessment methods employed, including “self-directed learning, classroom presentation, and being a member of academic teamwork,” diverge from the traditional learning culture in China (Wang & Devarajoo, 2022, p. 24). Our study’s context indicates that the curriculum, including instructional techniques, assessment practices, and educational tools and support materials, mirrors that of the parent university campus. Hence, students hailing from the traditional Chinese education system encountered significant difficulties in adapting to the teaching and assessment practices at IBCS, which may have contributed to their stress and anxiety. This finding aligns with the work of Luo et al. (2019), who posited that Chinese students often experience confusion when required to engage in self-directed learning and problem-solving, as they are accustomed to

memory-driven learning guided by direct instruction from teachers. Additionally, first-year students at IBCS also follow the Chinese curriculum, which may limit their exposure to Western curriculum and pedagogy during their first year.

The findings suggesting difficulties experienced by students in incorporating educational technology in their first year can be attributed to a similar context. The results reveal that high schools in China offer limited access to technology, devices, and the internet. This poses a considerable challenge for students at IBCs, whose curriculum is fully integrated with technology, web resources, and web tools. In addition to other curricular and instructional challenges, the transition to utilizing technology presents an extra burden for most students.

This study sheds light on the institutional challenges faced by students in comprehending the American college education system. The study was conducted at IBCs, which offers a liberal arts education and adheres to the American general education program. The literature on the intricacies of the general education program and complex prerequisites (Mintz, 2020) aligns with students' reported difficulties in comprehending the 4-year plan, prerequisite requirements, and electives. These challenges are specific to the study context, as students lacked support from peers, academic development staff, or faculty members who have expertise in understanding the GE or Liberal Arts curriculum, unlike international students studying abroad. However, the study also reveals various strategies employed by the students and support mechanisms available to them, which eased their transition during their initial days at IBCs.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study demonstrate that current academic practices in universities with a Sino-American connection pose significant difficulties for native students. These difficulties are evident in institutional challenges, such as diversity among faculty and academic regulations, as well as pedagogical challenges, such as instructional methods, evaluation practices, and the use of educational technology. Based on these findings, we suggest recommendations that could be applied to similar contexts.

Recommendation 1: Enriching Transition Course Curriculum

In transition courses, universities generally focus on enhancing students' personal and academic management abilities (Barnett et al., 2015). However, in contexts similar to the current study, it would be advantageous to provide orientation towards cultural compatibility, including diversity in faculty members' countries of origin, cultural backgrounds, and mannerisms in an academic setting. Addressing such issues can better prepare students for the academic experience. Although faculty accents have been reported as a barrier to academic adaptation, utilizing resources such as regular communication with faculty through popular messaging and calling apps such as WeChat can help mitigate this challenge. Additionally, these courses can offer valuable insight into the foreign campus's curriculum, including instructional methods, assessment practices, and educational tools.

Recommendation 2: Provision of Faculty and Staff Training on the General Education (GE) Curriculum

University management at IBCs should acknowledge that staff and faculty members educated in systems other than IBC must receive training to comprehensively understand the curriculum and philosophy. For example, in the current study context, we recommend a comprehensive training on GE course requirements and its underlying philosophy and delivery as conceptualized by

American colleges and universities for undergraduate education. General education courses are typically designed to expose students to a range of topics and ideas, rather than focusing on a specific career or major. The specific requirements for a general education curriculum can vary depending on the institution, but they typically include a set number of courses in each of the major disciplines which is reflected in students' 4-year plan. Students are guided to follow these requirements during advising meetings. International Branch Campuses in China with diverse faculty from all around the world would benefit from training on curricular requirements of the home institution. This will not only facilitate the provision of quality student support but also enhance curriculum delivery.

Recommendation 3: Technology Orientation

A comprehensive training program that utilizes web tools and their applications for teaching and learning would be beneficial for first-year students from Chinese high schools. Providing extensive training in the university's learning management system and effective navigation of online resources will also be valuable. It is also important to provide an overview of Chinese web tools available for teaching and learning purposes for foreign faculty members.

Recommendation 4: Learning to Use Interpersonal and Institutional Resources

The findings revealed that students heavily relied on seeking support from senior students and exploiting resources provided by the university to aid their academic adjustment. Spreading awareness among students about personal learning can be an effective way for students to use interpersonal and institutional resources to adapt to university life. Facilitating students build networking can help students access resources and support, as well as build relationships that can be valuable. Helping student acquire attitudes and strategies for help-seeking whether it's seeking academic support from a tutor or mental health support can help in adjustment. Regular training and awareness program about the availability of institutional resources that navigate the curricular requirement in the first year of university would be helpful.

The study findings suggest that students often have limited prior experience of close interaction with foreign faculty members prior to attending a Sino-American university, and their reactions to this experience can be varied. While initial direct interaction may prove overwhelming for all students, many have welcomed and made effective use of opportunities to improve their self-efficacy.

It is important to note that this study is not without limitations, and further research is required to fully understand the practical implications of the identified strategies. Future studies could also benefit from the examination of perspectives from other stakeholders, such as parents and university leadership, to gain a deeper understanding of academic adaptation and coping mechanisms.

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