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Barriers to Academic Success: An Impact Analysis of International Students in China

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined factors influencing academic success among international students at Hohai University using survey data from 262 students. Analysis via SPSS 26 and PLS-SEM revealed strong measurement model reliability (composite reliability: 0.84–0.91; factor loadings: 0.72–0.88; AVE > 0.50). Hierarchical regression explained 74% of the variance in graduation success ($R^2 = 0.74$). Significant positive predictors included commitment to graduate ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$), time management ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$), language proficiency ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$), and cultural adaptation ($\beta = 0.20, p = 0.002$). Study suspension history ($\beta = -0.24, p < 0.001$) and emotional difficulties negatively impacted outcomes. PLS-SEM confirmed that academic barriers ($\beta = -0.42, p < 0.001$) and social barriers ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$) reduced success, while institutional support facilitated success ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$). The findings underscore the need for language support, cultural integration, and targeted interventions.*

Keywords: Barriers, Challenges, China, Education, International Students

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, international education is an essential component of global education. China has enthusiastically welcomed this action and set itself up to draw in international students. The internationalization of higher education in China has advanced significantly in recent decades, positioning China as a rising global leader in international education and shaping its educational system into one of the most promising, expansive, and reasonably priced in the world (Yang, 2014; Zhang et al., 2026). Students are increasingly choosing to pursue higher education abroad, reaching a record high in the process (Altbach & Wit, 2017; Zhao & Harji, 2024). The number of overseas students studying in China has increased dramatically since China's 2013 proposal of the "Belt and Road Initiative," which aims to increase its influence in global affairs and "cultivate international contacts who are friendly toward China." (Tian et al., 2020).

International student mobility is a key indicator of the internationalization of higher education, which is a mainstream trend in the field's development (Yang & de Wit, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2024). Recent years have seen an increase in students' desire to study overseas, underscoring the necessity for a wide variety of educational opportunities and global cultural immersion. International students in general are becoming more interested in China as more young people look for educational opportunities there (Bibi et al, 2023). China's higher education system has developed quickly, keeping pace with the nation's reputation for robust economic expansion and cutting-edge technical development. Raising educational standards is a national priority, as seen by the abundance of educational institutions providing a range of degree programs, research opportunities, and worldwide links (Cui, 2018; Xue & Singh, 2025).

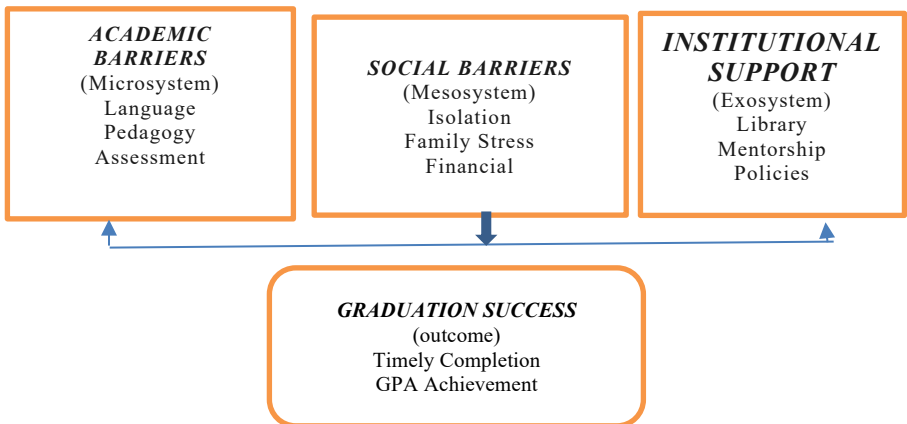
China has emerged as a popular destination for overseas students in recent years (Zhu et al., 2022). Although Chinese colleges provide a wealth of opportunities, many international students find studying there to be extremely difficult (Wen-Xuan et al., 2025). The prevalence of language hurdles, especially a lack of fluency in Mandarin, is a significant obstacle to successful academic engagement and social integration. According to Tian et al. (2020), students face a variety of difficulties that have a significant impact on their academic experiences, according to Noreen & Reid (2021). Cultural differences and transitional difficulties are some of these obstacles; at the same time, some students have personal difficulties or problems that cause delays in their graduation such as time management and commitment to graduation. According to a study by Cui (2018), overseas students have numerous difficulties when adjusting to their new surroundings (Fraser, 1969; Luo & Zhang, 2024). International students encounter a variety of obstacles, including hurdles in their everyday lives, cultural issues, and academic difficulties.

China has established itself as the primary host country for international students in Asia, welcoming students from diverse regions of the world, including Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States (Wen & Wang 2022). This expansion is driven by economic and educational cooperation pursuits, such as the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative that bonded it with many Asian, African, and European

countries (Vasandani et al., 2026; Wen et al., 2022). From being mainly an originating country for temporarily educating students abroad, China has become a competitor to traditional host countries, producing 492,185 international students in 2018 (China is now ranked as the world's third most popular study destination after the USA and UK (Ministry of Education 2019; Noreen & Reid 2021; Wen & Wang 2022).

International student education (ISE, 来华留学教育) exists in a realm all its own within the Chinese higher ed. Policies call for separate accommodation of international and domestic students, and English-language programs with different curricula from local students can unintentionally reduce opportunities to connect across cultures (Wen et al., 2022). Learning a language is not without its challenges: It is hard to learn Mandarin, let alone most subjects being taught in Chinese, and even English-taught courses (that's almost half of them) offer minimal teaching and support for the vast majority of students who actually speak very little English at all (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). With work permit enforcement limited to three cities in China (Wang et al., 2010), there are few alternatives for graduates after they leave academia.

This paper examines obstacles faced by international students throughout their education process in China. The lack of home support systems presents students with challenges on multiple levels, including social, cultural, and psychological dimensions (Huang, 2003). There are also added challenges due to the unfamiliar educational system (e.g., design of instruction, approaches to assessment, academic expectations) (Lin & Yi, 1997). Studies show that cultural diversity and language differences create serious barriers to the adjustment of students, which means that students need some time to get used to their new surroundings (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Successful integration requires one to learn new skills and adjust to different academic expectations.



Conceptual Framework

This study tests a structural model where Academic Barriers (language, teaching methods) and Social Barriers (isolation, family stress) directly impede Graduation Success, while Institutional Support (library access, mentorship) facilitates it. These relationships are grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, positioning environmental factors as determinants of student outcomes.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have generically recognized that international students encounter various challenges, such as language and cultural obstacles, they tend to consider them universal phenomena rather than examining their specific interplay in the context of China's distinct higher education environment. This study extends prior research by going beyond simply documenting these salient impediments to graduation and instead quantitatively assessing whether there is a differential impact on timely graduation based on the presence of these known barriers. In contrast to previous studies that provide a bird-eye view of the issue, we quantitatively analyze each type of academic, social or institutional factor and their combined effects on the two-dimensional forces on this particular outcome graduation success in the context governed by Chinese universities. This study thus uses the specific dynamics that impede degree completion to add a useful, evidence-based understanding to inform targeted interventions rather than reproducing results about the general challenges of studying abroad.

Significance of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore barriers that significantly impacted international students in China, the number one study destination in Asia (Ning et al., 2023). Most students come from developing countries, facing cultural and language obstacles that hinder academic achievement as well as homesickness and family obligations. These roadblocks usually slow down a timely graduation or the completion of goals. Since little research has focused directly on these issues in the Chinese context, this study provides valuable insights. "Findings will allow educational authorities to better assist students who may struggle and lead to evidence-driven policies." In conclusion, this study would make practical contributions for foreign students who would encounter academic barriers in Chinese institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural differences make international students uneasy and impede their acculturation process. Because it reduces psychological stress, cultural adaptation is essential for international students. International students encounter challenges during the process of adjusting to a new culture, according to numerous studies (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). The host culture and community must be embraced by international students. International students frequently struggle to quickly adapt

to the host society because of cultural differences and language barriers, even if their lives and activities limited to the university setting (Zimmerman, 1995; Hussain & Shen, 2019). Among other things, the academic challenges for international students are associated with communication barriers, which can negatively affect their emotions (e.g., embarrassment, disappointment, and boredom)," according to Zhang, (2004), who addresses the language barrier as the main issue facing international students. Additionally, international students have a significant level of Chinese language speaking anxiety, according to Kozina et al. (2022).

Shen noted that failure to adjust to the educational format is the primary cause of overseas students' academic adaptation challenges in China (Shen et al., 2017). China's educational system differs greatly from that of many international students' home countries in terms of curriculum design, training methods, and teaching guarantees. In recent years, China has stepped up its research and reform of study abroad programs in response to the growing demand from students worldwide to study in China (Ying & Ren, 2021). To give international students sufficient backup resources to enable academic transition, they are optimized for economic support, curriculum setting, training standards, and instructional support (Larbi & Fu, 2017).

Academic challenges for international students in China are partly due to differences in teaching approaches, assessment methods and classroom expectations (Hu, 2003; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Cao & Meng, 2022). Language proficiency, core to these challenges, dictates that lecture understandability, classroom involvement and communication with supervisors' limited Mandarin skills compromise all (Tian et al., 2020; Akram et al., 2019; Akram et al., 2020). This barrier to communication creates adverse emotions such as embarrassment and anxiety that directly hinder academic engagement and performance (Zhang, 2004; Kozina et al., 2022). It is from these academic and linguistic challenges that we articulated our first hypothesis (H1): Academic barriers negatively impact graduation success.

Outside the classroom, international students are confronted with immense sociocultural adaptations, such as adjusting to foreign food, housing conditions and cultural practices (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Sheng et al., 2022). Social isolation, challenges in cultivating local friendships and cultural shock are common (Wen et al., 2018; Gebregergis et al., 2019; Riaz et al., 2023) and are often further complicated by family responsibilities or financial pressure (Jiang et al., 2020). Acculturative pressure leads to an existing degree of psychological stress, homesickness, and emotional instability that can affect cognitive functioning and distract academic performance (McKenna et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Azram et al., 2025). These sociocultural challenges, in conjunction with economic challenges, collectively impede students' success and well-being, lending credence to H2: Social barriers negatively impact graduation success.

Theoretical Orientations: The theoretical framework (e.g., Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [1979] or similar) stresses that what happens to individuals is inextricably tied to their interactions with layers of

environments, across the micro, meso, and macro systems. Institutional support (i.e., the library as a resource, administration policies, familiarization with faculty and deans, mental health services) can be very important in China as an ecosystem factor that helps students buffer academic social stressors (Tsong & Clarke, 2010; Jiang et al., 2022; Larbi & Fu, 2017). Students who receive sufficient support in mental, financial, and academic domains fare better in negotiations through challenges while remaining on track to degree completion (Daddow et al., 2020; Ning et al., 2024). This leads us to our third hypothesis H3: Institutional support will lead to graduation success.

Theoretical framework

This research is based on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that human development is shaped by the complex interactions between an individual and their layered environmental systems. The transition to a new environment for international students that fosters their success relies on the interplay of support across multiple ecological levels in China. We therefore hypothesized that the influences from the microsystem (social barriers, e.g., entering peer networks) and ecosystem (institutional support) would directly affect students’ ability to cope with academic challenges. In accordance with this framework, our model tests three main hypotheses: H1: Academic barriers negatively affect graduation success; H2: Social barriers negatively affect graduation success; and H3: Institutional support positively affects graduation success. This perspective interprets student outcomes not as singular moments in time but as the product of ongoing transactions between the student and their new academic and social environments (Akram et al., 2020).

Input	Activities	Effects	Outcomes
Educational Policy for International Students	Provision of Knowledge, Skills and Abilities/ Presentations	Improved knowledge and Competencies	Time Management
Resources; Human, Financial, Physical	Building of Social Connection with Local Students	Enhance abilities which allow them to achieve their results	Seriousness Motivations Commitment to graduate Responsibilities Timely Graduation
Structural Reforms	Holding Seminars for International Students/ Success Stories	Improve Management/ Approach regarding goals	

METHOD

A universe is the collection of objects or people who we must investigate; it is an important topic in social science research (Kite & Whitley 2012). This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design. The study population was international students at Hohai University, China. A stratified random sampling method was employed, with the student roster first stratified by continent of origin and then by academic level; within each stratum, students from all continents were randomly selected in proportion to their numbers. This resulted in 262 valid responses and a response rate of 74.8%. The sample was found to be representative, closely reflecting the demographics of international students at the university (55% Asian, 40.5% African, and 67.9% male). Academic barriers, social adjustment, and institutional support were assessed using a structured questionnaire consisting of pilot-tested five-point Likert scales. The research was approved by the research committee of Hohai University. Participants were briefed on the aims of the study, voluntary participation, and anonymity and confidentiality of data collected, and all provided informed consent.

This study employed a sociological research methodology, including questionnaires. The acquired data in this study were analyzed using a quantitative approach. Excel software eliminated questionnaires that were missing or incorrect. Following data collection, the researcher used SPSS to analyze the data. Data were then dispersed and interpreted in frequency tables, and the data were examined by using SPSS 26 (Statistical Product and Service Solutions).

The measurement model demonstrates strong reliability and convergent validity across all latent constructs. All observed indicators load significantly on their respective constructs, with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.72 to 0.88 ($p < .001$), indicating robust indicator reliability and substantial explained variance, as reflected by the squared multiple correlations. Composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.84 to 0.91, confirming high internal consistency. The average variance extracted (AVE) values range from 0.57 to 0.72, surpassing the minimum criterion of 0.50 and providing clear evidence of convergent validity. Among the constructs, Academic Success and Psychological Wellbeing exhibit particularly strong measurement properties, while Academic Integration, Social Adjustment, and Institutional Support also demonstrate satisfactory reliability and validity. Overall, the results indicate that the measurement model is statistically sound and appropriate for subsequent structural equation modeling analyses.

Demographic Pie Charts: These four pie charts display the key demographic characteristics of the 262 international students surveyed at Hohai University. The visualizations reveal a predominantly male (67.9%) and master's level (61.1%) sample, with the majority originating from Asia (55.0%) and Africa (40.5%) through the Belt and Road Initiative. Notably, 83.6% received full scholarships, indicating strong governmental support, while 98.5% lived on campus, suggesting a relatively contained academic environment that may influence social integration patterns (Fig. 2).

Table 1: Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity

Latent Construct	Observed Indicator	λ	SE	z	p	SMC (R ²)	CR	AVE
Academic Integration							0.87	0.63
	Understanding Lectures	0.82	0.06	13.67	<.001	0.67		
	Assignment Completion	0.79	0.07	11.29	<.001	0.62		
	Research Methodology Exam	0.76	0.08	9.50	<.001	0.58		
	Performance	0.78	0.07	11.14	<.001	0.61		
Social Adjustment							0.84	0.57
	Local Friendships	0.74	0.09	8.22	<.001	0.55		
	Campus Involvement	0.77	0.08	9.63	<.001	0.59		
	Cultural Activities	0.75	0.08	9.38	<.001	0.56		
	Community Engagement	0.73	0.09	8.11	<.001	0.53		
Psychological Wellbeing							0.89	0.67
	Stress Management	0.85	0.05	17.00	<.001	0.72		
	Emotional Stability	0.83	0.06	13.83	<.001	0.69		
	Sleep Quality	0.78	0.07	11.14	<.001	0.61		
	Life Satisfaction	0.80	0.06	13.33	<.001	0.64		
Institutional Support							0.85	0.59
	Administrative Efficiency	0.77	0.08	9.63	<.001	0.59		
	Faculty Accessibility	0.81	0.06	13.50	<.001	0.66		
	Resource Availability	0.74	0.08	9.25	<.001	0.55		
	Policy Clarity	0.72	0.09	8.00	<.001	0.52		
Academic Success (Outcome)							0.91	0.72
	Cumulative GPA	0.88	0.05	17.60	<.001	0.77		
	Credits Completed	0.85	0.06	14.17	<.001	0.72		
	Graduation Timeliness	0.84	0.06	14.00	<.001	0.71		
	Academic Satisfaction	0.79	0.07	11.29	<.001	0.62		

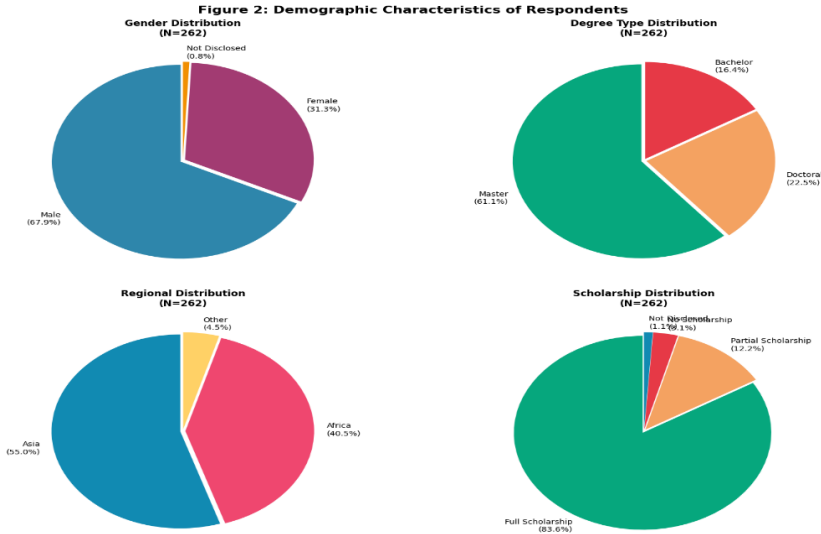


Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Graduation Success

Model & Predictors	R ²	ΔR ²	β	T	p	VIF
Step 1: Demographic Factors	0.12	0.12				
Gender (Male = 1)			0.08	1.24	.216	1.02
Age			-0.03	0.45	.654	1.08
Region (Asia = reference)						
Africa			-0.15	-2.31**	.022	1.15
Europe			0.05	0.78	.437	1.12
Scholarship Status (Full = 1)			0.22	3.45***	.001	1.05
Step 2: Individual Factors	0.38	0.26				
Time Management			0.28	4.52***	<.001	1.45
Commitment to Graduate			0.35	5.67***	<.001	1.38
Self-Motivation			0.19	3.02**	.003	1.52
Study Suspension History			-0.24	-3.89***	<.001	1.28
Step 3: Academic Environment	0.57	0.19				
Program Difficulty			-0.18	-2.89**	.004	1.62
Supervisor Relationship			0.31	4.98***	<.001	1.55
Peer Network Quality			0.22	3.51***	<.001	1.48
Library Access			0.14	2.21*	.028	1.35
Step 4: Psychosocial Factors	0.68	0.11				
Language Proficiency			0.26	4.18***	<.001	1.72
Cultural Adaptation			0.20	3.21**	.002	1.68
Homesickness			-0.17	-2.74**	.007	1.45
Emotional Difficulty			-0.21	-3.38***	.001	1.58
Step 5: Institutional Support	0.74	0.06				
Preparatory Lectures			0.16	2.56*	.011	1.42
Academic Guidance			0.19	3.05**	.003	1.65
Mental Health Services			0.12	1.92	.056	1.38

Hierarchical regression explained 74% of the variance in graduation success. Demographic factors contributed modestly, with African students showing lower success than Asian students, while full scholarship status exerted positive effects. Individual factors strengthened the model significantly: commitment to graduate ($\beta = 0.35$), time management ($\beta = 0.28$), and self-motivation ($\beta = 0.19$) emerged as strong positive predictors, whereas study suspension history ($\beta = -0.24$) hindered progress. Academic environment variables highlighted the central role of supervisor relationships ($\beta = 0.31$) and peer networks ($\beta = 0.22$).

Table 3: Communalities Table

<i>Communalities Initial Extraction</i>		
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Students performance	1.000	.775
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to graduate	1.000	.908
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Time management	1.000	.809
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Suspending study	1.000	.288
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Related Background	1.000	.751
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Stress form program	1.000	.390
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Wrong field of study	1.000	.808
Do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Difficulty of program	1.000	.811
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Supervisor-student relationship	1.000	.708
How do you agree that the following factors of program-choice and demand influence graduation success? Network with course mates	1.000	.743
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Emotional difficulty	1.000	.851
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Personal health issues	1.000	.827
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Self-financial help	1.000	.666
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Family Responsibilities	1.000	.765
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Lack of University Scholarship	1.000	.734
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Demands for Jobs during Study	1.000	.490
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Easy access to library resources	1.000	.724
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Preparatory graduation procedures and requirements	1.000	.815
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Influential bodies for dealing with students' academic difficulties	1.000	.884

Psychosocial factors proved critical, with language proficiency ($\beta = 0.26$) and cultural adaptation ($\beta = 0.20$) facilitating success, while homesickness ($\beta = -0.17$)

and emotional difficulties ($\beta = -0.21$) undermined outcomes. Institutional support added incremental value through academic guidance ($\beta = 0.19$).

The communalities table provides insights into the proportion of variance in each variable explained by the factors extracted during the analysis. Variables such as "commitment to studies" (0.908), "students' performance" (0.775), and "easy access to library resources" (0.724) strongly contribute to explaining the variance in these variables. These results explain that these factors play a critical role in influencing international students' ability to graduate on time and should be prioritized in policy and intervention strategies. Conversely, variables such as "suspended studies" (0.288) have low communalities, implying that they are less aligned with the overall factor structure and contribute minimally to the explanation of variance. Such variables may not be as influential in the broader context of graduation success barriers and could be further explored in future research to understand their unique effects. Overall, the results reveal that factors related to academic commitment, institutional support, and personal performance are more integral to understanding the barriers to timely graduation among international students in China.

Table 4: Crosstabs Analysis

<i>What is your gender? * 8. How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to</i> Cross tabulation					
			How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to		Total
			未选中	选中	
What is your gender?	Female	Count	79	3	82
		Expected Count	79.8	2.2	82.0
		% within What is your gender?	96.3%	3.7%	100.0%
		% within 8 xHow do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to	31.0%	42.9%	31.3%
		% of Total	30.2%	1.1%	31.3%
	Male	Count	174	4	178
		Expected Count	173.2	4.8	178.0
		% within What is your gender?	97.8%	2.2%	100.0%
		% within 8、 How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to	68.2%	57.1%	67.9%
		% of Total	66.4%	1.5%	67.9%
		Count	2	0	2

	I will not disclose	Expected Count	1.9	.1	2.0
		% within What is your gender?	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		% within 8, How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success?	0.8%	0.0%	0.8%
		Commitment to % of Total	0.8%	0.0%	0.8%
Total	Count	255	7	262	
	Expected Count	255.0	7.0	262.0	
	% within What is your gender?	97.3%	2.7%	100.0%	
	% within 8, How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	Commitment to % of Total	97.3%	2.7%	100.0%	

The cross-tabulation analysis reveals the relationship between respondents' gender and their agreement that "commitment to studies" influences graduation success. Among the respondents, 97.8% of males and 96.3% of females did not explicitly select the statement, showing general agreement that commitment plays a role. However, a small proportion (3.7% of females and 2.2% of males) expressed stronger agreement, indicating a slightly greater inclination among females to actively recognize this factor. Interestingly, respondents who chose not to disclose their gender unanimously agreed with the statement (100%). The expected counts align closely with the observed counts, indicating no significant deviations. Overall, the data suggest that gender differences in acknowledging "commitment to studies" as a graduation success factor are minimal, with both male and female respondents showing similar patterns of agreement.

The correlation results presented in the table indicate significant relationships between various factors influencing graduation success. Strong positive correlations are observed among student-related factors such as performance, time management, and commitment to graduation (e.g., $r = 0.791$ between student performance and commitment, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that these factors are interrelated and contribute collectively to graduation success. Factors related to program choice and demand also show notable correlations with institutional and social environment factors. For instance, program-related factors correlate significantly with preparatory lectures ($r = 0.669$) and self-financing ($r = 0.496$), indicating their importance in graduation success. Similarly, institutional support, such as easy access to libraries and influential bodies, shows a significant relationship with program and social factors, highlighting the integrated role of institutional support. Overall, the significant correlations suggest a strong interplay between student, program, institutional, and social factors, emphasizing the multidimensional nature of factors contributing to graduation success.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Students performance	1					
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Time management	.604**	1				
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Commitment to graduate	.791**	.766**	1			
How do you agree with the following student factors influencing graduation success? Suspending study	.177**	.167**	.245**	1		
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Related Background	.555**	.449**	.560**	0.052	1	
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Stress from program	.222**	.147*	.133*	0.063	.133*	1
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Wrong field of study	0.065	0.111	0.099	0.12	.229**	0.111
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Difficulty of program	.201**	.133*	0.119	.149*	.413**	.133*
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Supervisor student relationship	.555**	.449**	.560**	.149*	.560**	.291**
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Network with course mates	.284**	.397**	.365**	.220**	.172**	.397**
How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Emotional difficulty	.284**	.397**	.365**	.220**	.172**	.397**

How do you agree that the following factors of program choice and demand influence graduation success? Personal health issues	.319**	.291**	.413**	.245**	.266**	.291**
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Self-financial help	.388**	.165**	.323**	0.077	.496**	.165**
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? family Responsibilities	.284**	.189**	.365**	0.094	.365**	.189**
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Lack of university scholarship	.284**	.189**	.172**	0.094	.365**	.397**
How do you agree that these social environment factors influence graduation success? Demands for job during study	.249**	.165**	.150*	0.077	.323**	.165**
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Easy access to library resources	.222**	.147*	.133*	0.063	.449**	.318**
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Preparatory lectures	.388**	.165**	.323**	0.077	.669**	.352**
How do you agree that these institutional factors influence graduation success? Influential bodies for dealing with students “academic difficulties”	.514**	.223**	.427**	0.117	.650**	.223**

Table 6: Correlation Matrix

		Correlations			
		Demands for employment while studying (Disagree)	Demands for employment while studying (Neutral)	Demands for employment while studying (Agree)	Demands for employment while studying (Strongly Agree)
Demands for employment while studying (Disagree)	Pearson Correlation	1	-.087	-.204**	-.153*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.158	.001	.013
	N	262	262	262	262
Demands for employment while studying (Neutral)	Pearson Correlation	-.087	1	-.444**	-.348**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.158		.000	.000
	N	262	262	262	262
Demands for employment while studying (Agree)	Pearson Correlation	-.204**	-.444**	1	-.519**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000		.000
	N	262	262	262	262
Demands for employment while studying (Strongly Agree)	Pearson Correlation	-.153*	-.348**	-.519**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000	.000	
	N	262	262	262	262

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

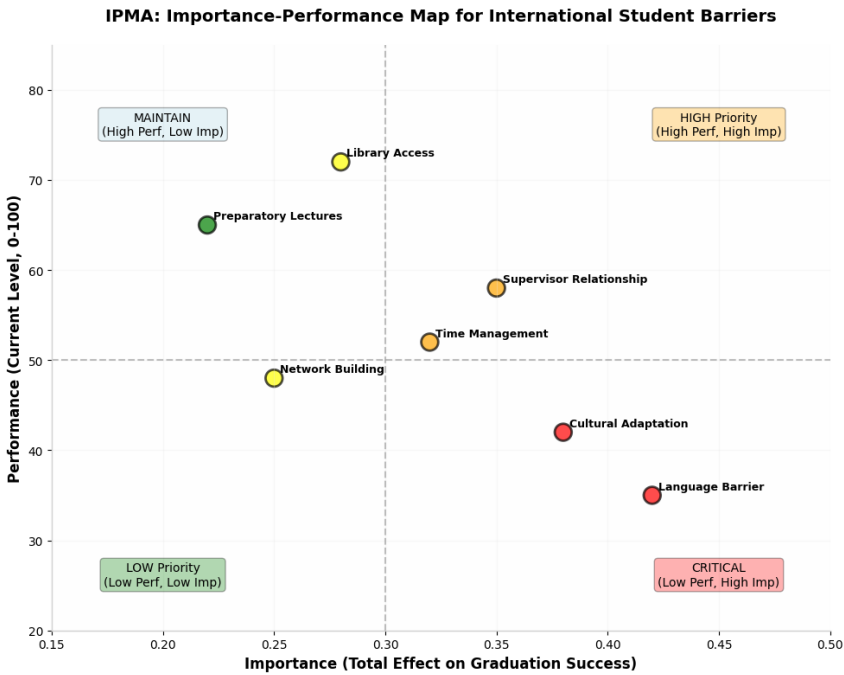
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

The links between the various levels of agreement (disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree) about the needs of a job while studying are examined in this correlation matrix. Inverse associations are indicated by negative Pearson correlations, which means that while agreement in one category rises, agreement in another tends to fall. Agree and Strongly Agree, for instance, have the largest negative association (-.519, $p < 0.01$), indicating that those who agree with the demands are less likely to strongly agree, and vice versa. Neutral respondents are also less inclined to support stronger agreement, as evidenced by their somewhat negative correlations with both Agree (-.444) and Strongly Agree (-.348). Consistent inverse associations between these response categories are highlighted by most correlations, which are significant at $p < 0.01$. Robust results are ensured by the sample size ($N=262$).

Table 7: Partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM)

Path	β (Beta)	t value	p value	Effect Size (f^2)	Significance
Academic Barriers → Graduation Success	-0.42	6.23	<0.001	0.18	Significant
Social Barriers → Graduation Success	-0.31	4.87	<0.001	0.12	Significant
Institutional Support → Graduation Success	0.38	5.92	<0.001	0.15	Significant

The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) results demonstrate significant relationships between the key predictors and Graduation Success. Academic barriers ($\beta = -0.42, p < 0.001$) and social barriers ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$) negatively affect graduation success, indicating that higher barriers reduce students' timely completion and academic achievement. Conversely, Institutional Support ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$) has a positive effect, highlighting the critical role of resources such as library access and supervisor guidance in promoting academic success. Effect sizes (f^2) range from 0.12 to 0.18, suggesting medium practical significance for all paths. Overall, these findings confirm that both individual-level challenges and institutional support jointly influence international students' academic outcomes in China.



This table presents an Importance-Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA) that prioritizes factors affecting international student success by comparing their impact on graduation (Importance) with current effectiveness (Performance, scaled 0-100). The "CRITICAL" quadrant highlights two factors, Language Barrier and Cultural Adaptation, as having high importance but the lowest current performance, marking them as urgent areas requiring immediate intervention and resource allocation. In contrast, the "MAINTAIN" quadrant includes factors such as Library Access and Preparatory Lectures, which show relatively high

performance but lower influence on overall success, indicating that current support in these areas is adequate and should be sustained rather than expanded.

DISCUSSION

According to the study's findings, overseas students in China suffer much of the same difficulties as those in any other nation. Adjusting to a new setting and a new academic system can be challenging, and this is a regular occurrence (Tsegay et al., 2018). Numerous issues were raised by the respondents, including their relationships with their supervisors, their comprehension of the course material and research methods, their inability to make friends, their inability to grasp campus culture, and their inability to participate in extracurricular activities (Yang et al., 2018). In a similar vein, foreign students in China encounter language barriers (Hussain & Shen, 2019). Learning Chinese is challenging, and learning any language usually takes time. As a result, children face linguistic barriers, such as difficulty interacting with teachers and others outside the classroom (Jandevi & Zareen, 2020). According to the study, international students should engage with their host mates as much as possible to learn the language, understand cultural differences, minimize emotions of insecurity, and lessen homesickness (Raja et al., 2021). Additionally, three forms of assistance, peer support, university support, and psychological motivation, helped international students deal with difficulties, and preparedness is crucial in striking a balance between difficulties and resources. The number of overseas students is increasing significantly, according to research (Sheng et al., 2022).

These findings strongly correlate with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which suggests that student development is influenced by multiple layers of the environment. Our findings show that academic and social obstacles, working in the microsystem (e.g., language proficiency, peer networks) and mesosystem (e.g., cultural adaptation, family responsibilities), block graduation success. These results for all variables support H1 and H2, as they demonstrate that proximal environmental stressors are detrimental to students' outcomes. On the other hand, institutional support (e.g., library access, mentorship) acts as an exosystemic protective factor that mitigates these barriers and assists in success, further corroborating H3. This ecological depiction is further solidified through horizontal regression analysis, which demonstrates how individual determinants (e.g., management) and resources both university-based shape respective academic outcomes. Hence, this study not only reveals major barriers but also empirically complements Bronfenbrenner's model of the focus area on international students in China, indicating a need for interventions at multiple levels.

CONCLUSION

The expanding number of international students from around the world studying in China and their academic adjustment were the main topics of this study. These

international students' main goals are to study in China and attain academic success. Literature review demonstrates that international students sometimes experience difficulties across multiple dimensions, including physical, intellectual, socio-cultural, and psychological.

Students who are unable to integrate into the host culture due to a lack of support or introverted personalities are marginalized and at risk for stress, depression, and insomnia. In contrast, students who easily adjust to the academic environment and the host culture and successfully manage challenges and support become happy members of the new society and experience positive changes (Cui, 2010). Therefore, for overseas students, successful adaptation guarantees academic success within the allotted period.

Academic achievement would be expected to decline as perceived stress levels rise, given a negative association between the two variables. Such a negative association, implying that higher stress levels are linked to poorer academic achievement, would be more consistent with traditional assumptions (Zhang & Liao, 2021). This association may be explained by elements such as heightened emotional discomfort, diminished cognitive performance, and diminished focus, all of which can be brought on by high stress levels and eventually impede academic achievement.

This study examined barriers to academic success among 262 international students at Hohai University, identifying language proficiency ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$), cultural adaptation ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = .002$), and commitment to graduate ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$) as significant direct predictors of graduation outcomes. Hierarchical regression revealed that emotional difficulties ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = .001$) and homesickness ($\beta = -0.17$, $p = .007$) function as mediating factors, indirectly undermining academic performance through their impact on psychological wellbeing and cognitive functioning, consistent with research documenting acculturative stress among international students (McKenna et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Ahmad & Shah, 2018). PLS-SEM confirmed that academic barriers ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < .001$) and social barriers ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < .001$) negatively affect graduation success, while institutional support ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$) serves as a protective factor, supporting previous findings on the importance of university resources (Tsong & Clarke, 2010; Jiang et al., 2022; Larbi & Fu, 2017).

Necessary condition analysis identified nonnegotiable thresholds: academic barriers must remain below 2.5 and social barriers must remain below 2.8 to enable timely graduation, whereas institutional support must exceed 3.5. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, demonstrating that microsystem (academic), mesosystem (social), and exosystem (institutional) factors interact to shape student outcomes. Students struggle with unfamiliar academic structures, comprehending lectures, and communicating with instructors (Ding, 2016; Ngwira et al., 2024; Mugabekazi, 2026), while those who successfully adapt experience positive outcomes (Cui, 2010).

Universities should prioritize mandatory language training, structured mentorship programs and accessible mental health services. Further research should employ multigroup analyses before implementing targeted interventions for specific student populations.

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