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Preparing Chinese Students for International Education: AI Guidance, Major Choice, and Career Decision Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

The growing international mobility of Chinese students has increased the importance of effective academic guidance in preparing students for overseas education. Although artificial intelligence (AI) offers new opportunities to support academic and career decision-making, its relationship with students' international education readiness remains underexplored. This study examines the associations among AI-supported academic guidance, major choice quality, career decision self-efficacy, and international education readiness among Chinese high school students. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design, data were collected from 150 students through structured questionnaires and analyzed using correlation, regression, and mediation analyses. The findings revealed significant positive relationships among AI-supported guidance, major choice quality, career decision self-efficacy, and international education readiness. Mediation analysis further indicated that career decision self-efficacy played an important role in explaining the relationship between AI-supported guidance and students' readiness for international education. These findings suggest that AI-supported academic guidance may contribute to international education preparation by strengthening students' confidence in academic and career decision-making. The study highlights the potential value of integrating AI-assisted guidance with student-centered counseling practices to support informed major selection and preparation for international educational opportunities.

Keywords: academic guidance, artificial intelligence, career decision self-efficacy, Chinese students, education readiness, global mobility

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of international higher education has increased student mobility worldwide, making it a central element of educational globalization. This has occurred mostly among Chinese students, who remain among the largest outbound mobility groups. Nevertheless, recent upheavals, including COVID-19, have reshaped mobility trends and perceptions of risk, destination choice, and readiness to study in different countries. This study found that Chinese students are now more conservative and tactical, paying greater attention to safety, flexibility, and long-term returns when considering studying abroad (Mok et al., 2021).

Moreover, the international student movement is becoming increasingly interpreted as a process that is conditioned by various types of capital, such as economic, cultural, and symbolic resources. Chinese students' preferences no longer depend on the prestige of foreign institutions but on how their academic options align with current and future career potential in the global labor market. This trend underscores the growing importance of choosing academic majors that facilitate international mobility and employability (P. Yang, 2022).

Despite this increase in strategic orientation, students still face considerable difficulties in making academic major decisions. China's education system is highly competitive and exam-based, and personalized academic guidance is not widely available, which can leave students frustrated by generalized or externally imposed advice. This can create discrepancies in students' capabilities, interests, and academic majors and, ultimately, affect students' academic engagement and readiness to learn more (Temirgalinova, 2026). Moreover, the new trends in cross-border education in China make it possible to argue that even domestic mobility decisions are accompanied by a complex set of considerations, such as international paths (Z. Liu et al, 2025).

As outbound student mobility increases, Chinese high school students face increasingly challenging decisions about international education opportunities, particularly regarding academic major selection to pursue international study. Pre-departure academic decision-making has emerged as an essential element of international education preparedness, where students are forced to cope with the ambiguities of foreign education systems and future career paths. In response, artificial intelligence (AI) has also been implemented in academic guidance systems to support mobility planning by providing students with tailored advice based on their data and career trends, reflecting China's broader digitalization of the education sector (Knox, 2020).

Nonetheless, AI in pre-mobility decision-making is increasingly critical. Although AI can potentially increase the provision of advice, there are concerns about the credibility, trustworthiness, and manipulation of students' autonomy. It can also be said that overdependence on algorithmic suggestions can decrease the degree of critical interaction, which can deteriorate the idea of informed decision-making in the context of international education (Celik et al, 2022).

Furthermore, broader research on scholastic mobility indicates that students' willingness is shaped by local and personal motivations, along with socioeconomic constraints (Duffy & Lin, 2026). These results suggest that technologically mediated solutions may not capture the intricacies of academic decision-making and that, beyond mobility preparation, more multilayered approaches are needed (Juškevičienė et al., 2022).

The early high-stakes choices that Chinese high school learners carefully consider when planning a possible study abroad constitute a key premobility demographic, since they determine future international education trajectories by relying on academic major choices. This decision-making stage, which takes place prior to cross-border transition, is among the key points of international education preparedness yet is underresearched. Current school guidance programs tend to be impersonal and inefficient and restrict student opportunities to match academic options with international opportunities. Despite the growing advocacy around the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance academic advising, the range of its use in assisting outbound mobility planning is not well established in terms of its role in enhancing decision

quality. Although AI can improve access to information, concerns remain about its practical application and credibility (Lampou, 2023). Moreover, the limited incorporation of psychological concepts, including self-efficacy, leaves a knowledge gap in how technological and personal factors combine to determine international education readiness (Azpilicueta et al., 2024).

Research Question

- How AI-supported academic guidance is related to major choice quality among Chinese high school students?
- How is AI-supported academic guidance related to international education readiness?
- How is major choice quality related to international education readiness?
- Does career decision self-efficacy mediate the relationship between AI-supported academic guidance and international education readiness?

The proposed research has added to the scholarship of academic areas of international student mobility because it explores how academic guidance using AI can assist with premobility planning, readiness formation, and decision-making about studying abroad in China among high school students. Although other studies indicate increased adoption of artificial intelligence in teaching, they place less emphasis on how it can benefit students during the transition phase before crossing the border (Salas-Pilco & Yang, 2022). This research fills this gap by examining how students make informed academic decisions that shape their readiness for international education pathways. Moreover, it focuses on building future competencies, such as reflective planning and reconciling academic choices with global possibilities (effectiveness in mobility outcomes) (Mononen, 2025). The results have implications for designing more equitable and effective pre-mobility guidance systems for international education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Education Readiness and Global Mobility

International education preparedness is a multidimensional concept that involves academic preparedness, the availability of pertinent information, psychological preparedness, and planning overseas study directions. For students who have plans to study abroad, preparation is not just a matter of academic fit but also an understanding of how to make an informed choice about majors and career paths in the future. Recent studies on international student mobility indicate that pre-deadment expectations, goal clarity and the availability of guidance play important roles in defining the transition and success of students in international education settings (Mok et al., 2021; Yang, 2022). Academic decision-making at the secondary level in this respect is an important phase of mobility preparation. Although artificial intelligence (AI) has been implemented to aid in guidance processes by making specific suggestions to users, the aspect of enhancing readiness has been a contentious issue. Although AI can increase access to information, its usefulness depends on its alignment with a student's personal motivation and context-independent decision-making process (Hashim et al., 2022).

Regarding decision-making, AI-based educational analytics have been shown to support more informed academic decisions by extracting patterns and forecasting appropriate learning paths. These systems have the potential to decrease uncertainty by providing information-based recommendations, thus helping students make complicated academic decisions. However, there have been arguments about the interpretability of such recommendations, with students possibly being too unskilled to assess those created by AI, which could result in over-trusting or incorrect judgments (de Souza et al., 2023).

The presence of empirical studies on recommendation systems based on AI also demonstrates the role they play in the selection of courses and the selection of majors by students. For example, AI-based recommender systems can facilitate the decision-making process by suggesting the best options on the basis of historical data, potentially leading to increased decision efficiency. This effectiveness, however, is not always associated with the improved quality of decisions, as algorithmic recommendations could be more

concerned with trends than with student aspirations, calling into question the richness and genuineness of their decisions (Cha et al, 2024).

In the Chinese context, AI in career initiation education has been embedded as a tactical mechanism to facilitate early school planning. These systems aim to address gaps in conventional counseling by providing accessible, scalable guidance solutions. However, their implementation is also indicative of systemic issues, with gaps in access to digital and the necessity of culturally responsive models that consider social expectations as a major choice (Cheng & Liang, 2023).

Additionally, intelligent tutoring systems and AI-based pedagogies indirectly affect the quality of major choices by increasing student engagement and self-understanding. When exposed to AI-driven learning systems to a greater extent, students will be able to learn their potential and their own interests more properly, and these aspects are the key elements in the process of constructive academic choice. Nonetheless, these advantages largely depend on pedagogical planning and on the extent to which AI is incorporated into meaningful learning processes rather than technological processes (Guo et al., 2021).

At the same time, broader debates about AI in education highlight ethical and practical issues, such as algorithmic bias and the possible exclusion of human judgment from decision-making. These problems suggest that although AI is expected to enhance academic guidance, its role in major choice should be critically evaluated as part of a balanced system that considers both technological and human support (Khreisat et al., 2024).

Moreover, other recent studies highlight that the effects of AI on student performance are mediated by teaching methods and engagement rates. This means that AI will not be able to define the quality of academic decisions, but its quality is predetermined by its implementation in the conditions of a positive educational climate that fosters critical thinking and independence (Long et al, 2026).

AI-supported academic guidance related to international education readiness

Student mobility includes international education preparedness as a critical factor, including academic preparedness, access to relevant information, psychological preparedness, and strategic planning for overseas study. Students' preparedness to study internationally depends on their knowledge of international education systems, aligning academic paths with international opportunities, and developing an adaptable response to learning in foreign countries. According to previous research, the preparation of premobility, such as making informed decisions and understanding academic objectives, is a key factor in determining successful international transitions (Guppy et al., 2022).

Global learning readiness has also become a growing concern since the onset of worldwide digital learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to online and technology-enriched learning in China created a situation in which students were exposed to the cross-border and international mode of education and were familiar with international learning methods. This exposure helps prepare students by immersing them in fluid, self-directed, and globally interconnected learning experiences typical of international higher education systems (Huang et al., 2020).

In addition to continuity in international education in the short term, the preparation of international education is strongly associated with the enhancement of more comprehensive competencies such as digital literacy, problem solving, and flexibility. This is critical given unrecognized academic and cultural standards in foreign countries. However, studies also show that access to digital resources and variation in how technology is implemented in the learning process can affect students' preparedness and suggest that readiness depends on both individual capabilities and structural factors (Lopez-Vargas et al., 2021).

In this context, the practice of AI-assisted academic guidance can be a complementary instrument that can be used to help students in pre-mobility planning. Instead of being a major cause of change, AI can assist with preparedness, offering students their own-personalized academic data, assisting them in discovering appropriate majors, and making learning options consistent with possible global opportunities. This aligns with a new school of thought that focuses on applying technology to support informed decision-making and long-term educational planning (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2026). Its efficacy, however, lies in its capacity to be incorporated into wide guidance practices.

At the institutional level, the position of educators is critical in creating the preparedness of students. Effectively implementing digital and AI-assisted tools requires teachers to integrate them into teaching methods that promote critical thinking and self-directed learning. Research has indicated that when educators are highly digitally competent, students are more assisted in cultivating the skills needed to succeed in international academic settings. On the other hand, the possible advantages of such technologies might be diminished by the lack of teacher preparedness (Aimicheva et al., 2025).

Moreover, the ability of students to approach guidance systems themselves is crucial. Studies of Chinese high school students show that AI literacy shapes their ability to interpret advice, critically analyze information, and make informed decisions about their future educational paths. They are important skills needed in premobility planning because learners deserve to navigate their way through complicated decisions concerning study abroad pathways (Lin et al., 2025).

On balance, although AI-based technologies may play a role in the course of academic guidance, international education preparedness is a multidimensional phenomenon that has individual, institutional, and circumstantial determinants. This underlines how AI-assisted guidance can be considered as a part of a bigger picture in terms of preparing people to be mobile instead of being the focus of international education research (Ouyang & Jiao, 2021; Bond et al., 2020).

Major Choice Quality Related to International Education Readiness

The correlation between major choice quality and readiness for international education has become more widely discussed because students' academic choices are directly connected to their ability to adjust and succeed in global study conditions. When students make well-decided and strategically oriented major decisions, they demonstrate a better form of motivation and purpose for studying when they decide to study overseas. Major choice, which is typical of the Chinese context, can be affected by the compatibility of chosen majors with future career opportunities, which means that more-quality choices play a role in more meaningful and better-equipped career mobility paths (S. Liu, et al, 2023).

Readiness is further influenced by students' expectations and motivations related to academic decisions. When a major matches personal interests and goals, students have better opportunities to stay engaged and adapt to new academic environments. Nevertheless, unmet expectations and experience may trigger motivation problems, which undercut international education preparedness (Mao et al, 2022).

Academic efficacy and involvement are also key elements. When a student is confident in his or her academic path, the engagement and satisfaction levels tend to be high, and both are vital in adapting to the requirements of studying abroad. Conversely, incorrectly oriented key decisions can decrease confidence and restrict input, ultimately hindering preparedness (Sharif Nia et al., 2023).

Academic clarity also supports cross-cultural adjustment. With clear goals and aims, usually grounded in a well-chosen major, such a student is better equipped to cope with both cultural and academic pressure in a foreign country. Nevertheless, academic choices are not the only criterion of readiness, and institutional support and social integration are also important (Cao & Meng, 2022).

Major alignment is also emphasized in career decision-making processes. A better strategy to cope with the international academic environment is offered by students with the ability to make informed and reflective decisions, especially in challenging international education systems, but the probability of uncertainty is still formidable (W. Li et al, 2024).

In addition, international mobility builds intercultural competence and employability, depending on the relevance of students' academic backgrounds. The ability to transfer knowledge and respond to the needs of the global labor market is improved with a well-chosen major, reinforcing preparation (Guzmán Mátar, 2025). Nevertheless, not all students are perceived as employable, and unequal access to guidance could influence how students make decisions (Mueller & Robert, 2021). The processes of cultural adaptation also suggest that academic preparation is interconnected with more general social factors; thus, it must be modified continuously in the context of international relations (Zhao et al, 2020).

Career Decision Self-Efficacy Mediates Links between AI Guidance and International Education Readiness

The mediating effect of career decision self-efficacy on the correlation between AI-guided academic guidance and international education readiness can be conceptualized within the scope of social cognitive career theory, with self-efficacy being the focus of interaction between the environment and behavioral outputs. In this context, technology-based solutions such as AI-based guidance systems may affect the confidence of students in making career-related choices, which, in turn, will determine their readiness to pursue convoluted learning trajectories, including studying abroad (D. Wang et al, 2022).

Self-efficacy in career decision-making is considered to be a predictive factor of adaptive career results. Students who have a stronger self-efficacy opinion tend to have greater degrees of satisfaction in their academic and career selection, which indicates that the self-efficacy of choices is a great power that can help them choose the educational path and subsequent objectives. This correlation, however, is also determined by context, i.e., socioeconomic status, meaning that self-efficacy does not act alone but rather is related to the wider framework of structural conditions (M. Li et al, 2023).

The mediating role of self-efficacy in career choices and its role in education is supported by the empirical literature. Research has indicated that self-efficacy could be a mediator between external support systems and career adaptability and thus come into play in the conversion of guidance into actionable results. This implies that academic guidance, with the assistance of AI, could only be effective at improving readiness when it can reinforce the conviction in the ability to make decisions among students (Salim et al, 2023).

As AI becomes involved in education, it creates new parameters for this relationship by transforming student agency and autonomy. With the help of AI-supported environments, one can offer personal feedback and data-driven insights, which may increase the engagement between students and career planning processes. Nevertheless, the degree to which these systems could contribute to the development of real self-efficacy is disputable because the use of automated recommendations can narrow the possibility of building an independent decision-making process (Banoglu et al, 2025).

Research carried out online and in technology-mediated instructional settings also emphasizes the role of self-efficacy as a mediator. The results reveal that although digital guidance systems have the capacity to aid in the career decision-making process, their use mostly relies on how comfortable students are with using and interpreting the presented information. The absence of enough self-efficacy might stop the implementation of guidance alone, leading to better readiness (Sofyan et al, 2022).

In Chinese contexts, career decision-making preparedness has shown that guided preparations in terms of career choices can promote student confidence and readiness toward future transitions in education. Such data indicate that both traditional and AI-based guidance systems should actively participate in the formation of self-efficacy to achieve meaningful results (X. Gu et al, 2020).

In addition, career decision self-efficacy has been shown to mediate the interaction between social support and career management competence, which supports its presence as among the most important psychological processes connecting external inputs and preparedness outputs. This means that AI-assisted guidance can perform the same role by impacting self-efficacy as an intermediate variable (Wang & Jiao, 2023).

Finally, new studies conducted on AI-based learning spaces note that they can improve self-regulation and autonomous learning patterns. These characteristics are directly linked to self-efficacy and are required to adjust to international education settings. Nevertheless, the quality of AI in developing all these competencies relies on its mechanisms situated within conducive educational settings that are not based on passive consumption but rather active learning (L. Yang, 2026).

Literature Gap

Although research on AI-mediated academic guidance is growing, critical gaps remain in understanding its effects on meaningful academic outcomes. Existing research has rarely connected

mobility, international education readiness, major choice quality, and AI-supported academic guidance among Chinese senior high school students who may pursue overseas study. While studies highlight AI's role in improving access and decision-making efficiency, they often examine these factors in isolation (Hashim et al., 2022; Cha et al., 2024). Similarly, the link between technological support and readiness for international education remains insufficiently integrated (Guppy et al., 2022; Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2026). Although career decision self-efficacy has been recognized as a mediating factor, few studies have tested its role in AI-based guidance, especially in relation to Chinese high school students (Salim et al., 2023; Wang & Jiao, 2023).

Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is an apt theory that can be used to explain premobility international education readiness because it focuses on how the choice of students is influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental support. Academic guidance, such as AI-related systems, in the context of studying abroad is a factor within the environment that affects students' confidence in their ability to make major decisions and expectations regarding the results of studying abroad (Lent, 2020). All these factors influence the readiness of students to engage in worldwide learning. Nevertheless, since, at the time of its creation, SCCT preceded the digital revolution, the implementation at hand needs to be expanded to consider the ways in which self-efficacy and decision-making are influenced by AI-mediated environments (Brown and Lent, 2023).

Research Hypothesis

- H1: AI-supported academic guidance is positively associated with major choice quality.
- H2: AI-supported academic guidance is positively associated with international education readiness.
- H3: Major choice quality is positively associated with international education readiness.
- H4: Career decision self-efficacy mediates the relationship between AI-supported academic guidance and international education readiness.
- H4a: AI-supported academic guidance positively influences career decision self-efficacy.
- H4b: Career decision self-efficacy positively influences international education readiness.

Conceptual Framework

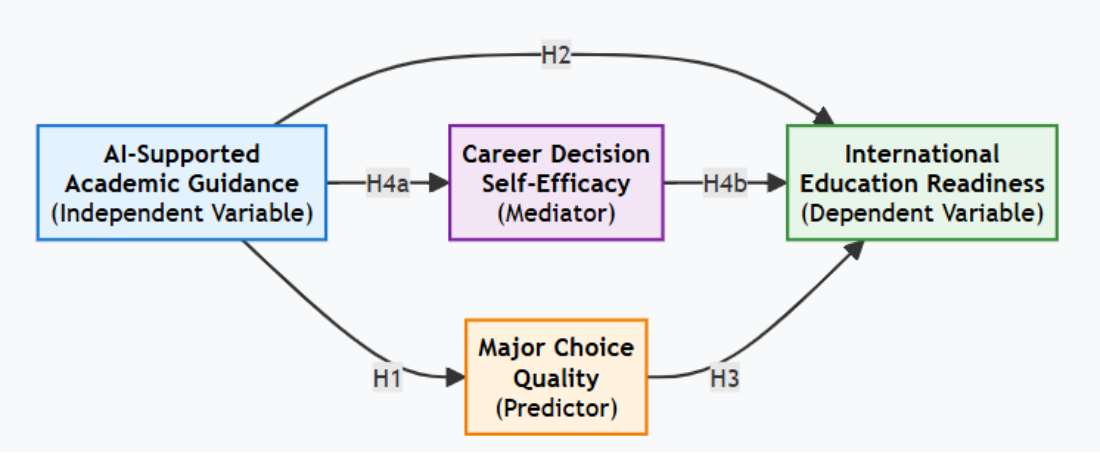


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The hypothesis is that AI-based academic advising can have a positive or negative direct or indirect effect on international education readiness via career decision self-efficacy. Although major choice quality is considered an added predictor of readiness, it is not adjusted to be a mediating variable in the tested

framework. The conceptual model, therefore, narrows down the mediation variable of self-efficacy, which makes the conceptual model consistent with the hypotheses of the study (Figure 1).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

In this paper, a quantitative cross-sectional survey in which the perception of international education preparedness was explored and related to academic guidance with AI support, the quality of major selection, and the self-efficacy of career choices was used. It was a design oriented at determining associational relationships, instead of causal effects, the perception and experiences of the students at one point in time.

Population and Sample

The target population included 150 Chinese senior high school pupils in Grade 12 of urban and semiurban schools in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong Province who were actively engaged in preuniversity and overseas study planning. We used stratified random sampling: schools were classified by region and type (public, private, international), and participants within each stratum were randomly selected. They are suitable since this group is at a very critical stage of premobility, and major academic and international education choices are part of readiness creation.

Research instrument

The questionnaire was structured into four constructs of 4 items each and was based on the literature. Items included in AI-assisted academic guidance were based on academic decision-making-scale studies on major choice quality (Cha et al., 2024), academic decision-making-scale studies on career decision self-efficacy (Salim et al., 2023), major choice quality on academic decision-making-scale studies (Hashim et al., 2022), and mobility readiness research academic decision-making-scale sample items: AI tools help me in my major decisions, and I am ready to study abroad. Pilot testing was used to adapt the items to the Chinese high school environment.

AI-supported academic guidance is defined here by students' engagement with AI-powered academic guidance and career guidance tools that offer personalized academic recommendations, major selection suggestions, and study pathway information. There is no limitation with regard to the type of AI platform used; students were asked to think about AI tools they actually used, such as generative AI applications (e.g., ChatGPT), AI systems for recommendations, and digital academic guidance platforms. The construct thus reflects students' perceptions of their experience and usefulness of AI-supported guidance rather than of a particular software product.

Four items were used to measure each construct to achieve measurement efficiency as well as adequate coverage of the theoretical dimensions. Four-item scales are popular in learning and psychological studies because of the adequate indication they give of instances when measuring latent constructs, in addition to the fact that they lessen respondent exhaustion, especially among young respondents. Given the high school students who were the respondents, it was thought that it would be best to use concise measurement tools to enhance understanding, the quality of responses and the quality of completion. The chosen items were based on previous scales that were verified earlier and changed on the basis of the Chinese high school environment using pilot testing.

Measurement of Variables

The variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. There was good construct-level consistency: AI guidance (=.861), major choice quality (=.842), self-efficacy (=.879), and readiness (=.888), demonstrating measurement validity and reliability.

Following previous educational and psychological measurement studies, each construct was measured using four items. Multi-item scales are also suitable because they minimize the cognitive load

among the respondents (mainly adolescents) while ensuring sufficient coverage of the construct domain. Given that the participants were still high school students, four-item measures were a compromise between measurement reliability and questionnaire completion efficiency. These findings also led to the relevance of the scales, as the Cronbach's alpha was 0.842 and 0.888 for all the constructs.

CFA was not performed because of the exploratory nature of the study and the rather small sample size (N = 150). Rather, construct validity was upheld by adapting previously tested scales of measurements. Previous academic decision-making research, career decision self-efficacy, and major choice quality items were based on existing self-efficacy scales, international mobility readiness items were based on international education adaptation scales, and international education readiness items were based on international mobility readiness scales. Moreover, the internal consistency of all the constructs was satisfactory, with the value of Cronbach's alpha above the recommended value of 0.70.

Data Collection Procedure

The sample size was chosen in the schools that were selected for data collection with the consent of school authorities, who recruited the participants during school hours. Because the participants were underage, the schools obtained informed consent from the students and their legal guardians through formal consent procedures. Participation was voluntary, and answers were anonymized. Before analysis, the responses were reviewed for completeness, missing responses, and inconsistent patterns of responses. A data cleaning process was undertaken whereby incomplete questionnaires were not included. A total of 150 valid responses were received after this screening and were used for the final analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Version 26). Participant characteristics were described by means of descriptive statistics, whereas reliability was determined by Cronbach's alpha. Normality, linearity, and multicollinearity assumptions were pretested. Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationships between variables, and the direct effect was tested using multiple regression. Data were analyzed by mediation through the PROCESS Macro Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval to determine the indirect effects.

Parental education and school type/location were added as potential covariates to test the robustness of the hypothesized relationships to theoretically relevant demographic and contextual variables in the supplementary analyses. The variables were chosen a priori: parental education might be related to differences in socioeconomic resources, educational expectations, and information on overseas study, whereas school type/location might be related to differences in academic and career guidance and institutional resources. Other demographic variables were not included in the adjusted models, as this resulted in too few participants in the models and reduced the statistical power. Parental education was scored as an ordinal variable from 1 (primary education or less) to 4 (master's degree or more). The kind of school (public or private) and location (urban, suburban, or rural) were dummy-coded, with urban public schools serving as the reference. These covariates were then added to the regression models of key choice quality and international education readiness. Another analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 4, with parental education and school type/location as the covariates in both the mediator and outcome equations. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant if the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero and when 5,000 bootstrap samples were used.

Given that all the construct data were gathered on a single self-report questionnaire, the risk of common method bias (CMB) was evaluated. The single-factor test developed by Harman was used to test his factor by keying in all the measurement items in an unrotated exploratory factor test. The first factor was able to explain [32.74%] of the total variance, which was lower than the suggested percentage of 50. Hence, common method bias was not considered a serious issue in the current research.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical standards. To ensure anonymity, the responses were kept confidential, and participation was voluntary. No personal identifiers were gathered, and the data were used only for academic purposes. The participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without any repercussions.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical results of the research, which are based on data gathered among Chinese high school students. The analysis uses descriptive statistics, reliability testing, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis to establish relationships among the variables. The findings provide information on the effects of AI-supported academic advice, the quality of major selection and the self-efficacy of career decisions on international education preparedness and test the hypotheses of the proposed research.

Frequency Distribution

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of the Respondents

Response status	Gender	Grade level	School type	Parental education	International study intention
Valid, n	150	150	150	150	150
Missing, n	0	0	0	0	0

All 150 respondents completed the survey without missing data, ensuring full participation across all demographic variables, including gender, grade level, school type, parental education, and international study intention (Table 1).

Demographics

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Gender

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Female	66	44.0	44.0	44.0
Male	78	52.0	52.0	96.0
Prefer not to say	6	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	—

The balanced gender distribution ensures diverse perspectives in international education readiness, suggesting that the findings reflect both male and female students' preparedness for global mobility and overseas study decision-making processes (Table 2).

Table 3

Frequency Distribution of Grade Level

Grade level	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Grade 10	50	33.3	33.3	33.3
Grade 11	52	34.7	34.7	68.0
Grade 12	48	32.0	32.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	—

The even distribution across grade levels reflects students at different premobility stages, capturing varying levels of academic planning and readiness for international education pathways and overseas study decisions (Table 3).

Table 4

Frequency Distribution of School Type/Location

School type	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Urban Public School	60	40.0	40.0	40.0
Rural Public School	35	23.3	23.3	63.3
Private School	30	20.0	20.0	83.3
International School	25	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	—

Diverse school types indicate varied access to resources and guidance, influencing students' exposure to international education opportunities and shaping differences in readiness for global academic mobility pathways (Table 4).

Table 5

Frequency Distribution of Parental Education

Education level	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Primary or below	20	13.3	13.3	13.3
Secondary School	55	36.7	36.7	50.0
Bachelor's Degree	50	33.3	33.3	83.3
Master's or above	25	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	—

Parental education levels reflect socioeconomic and informational support, which can influence students' awareness, expectations, and preparedness for international education and study abroad planning decisions (Table 5).

Table 6

Frequency Distribution of International Study Intention

Intention	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Yes	90	60.0	60.0	60.0
No	25	16.7	16.7	76.7
Undecided	35	23.3	23.3	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	—

High intention to study abroad highlights the relevance of premobility readiness, indicating that many students are actively engaged in planning international education pathways and require effective academic guidance support (Table 6).

Reliability Test

Table 7
Reliability Test

Variable	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Number of items
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	0.861	4
Major Choice Quality	0.842	4
Career Decision Self-Efficacy	0.879	4
International Education Readiness	0.888	4

The reliability analysis revealed that all the constructs were good in terms of internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.842 to 0.888. This finding confirms that both scales can measure their respective construct with reliability and are suitable for determining AI-aided academic guidance, major choice goodness, career choice self-efficacy, and international educational preparedness (Table 7).

Correlation Analysis

Table 8
Pearson Correlations

Variables	AI Guidance	Major Choice Quality	Career Decision Self-Efficacy	International Education Readiness
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	1	.612	.658	.601
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	< .001	< .001	< .001
Major Choice Quality	.612	1	.645	.670
Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	—	< .001	< .001
Career Decision Self-Efficacy	.658	.645	1	.702
Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	< .001	—	< .001
International Education Readiness	.601	.670	.702	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	< .001	< .001	—

Correlation analysis indicates that the variables have a significant and positive relationship. The academic guidance provided through AI is closely connected with career decision self-efficacy (r = .658) and is moderately closer to international education readiness (r = .601). The quality of major choices is closely linked to the readiness for international education (r = .670), which demonstrates that the quality of major choices positively influences the preparation of students for global education. Additionally, career decision self-efficacy is most strongly correlated with international education readiness (r = .702), which points to the importance of career decision self-efficacy in determining the readiness of students to study in another country.

Regression Analysis

Model 1: AI-Supported Academic Guidance → Major Choice Quality (H1)

Table 9
Model Summary (H1)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard error of the estimate
1	.612	.375	.371	.6215

AI-supported academic guidance explains 37.5% of the variance in major choice quality, indicating a moderate predictive relationship (Table 9).

Table 10
ANOVA (H1)

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Regression	56.214	1	56.214	145.23	< .001
Residual	93.786	148	.634	—	—
Total	150.000	149	—	—	—

The model is statistically significant (F = 145.23, p = .000) (Table 10).

Table 11
Coefficients (H1)

Predictor	B	Standard error	β	t	p
Constant	1.134	.231	—	4.907	< .001
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	.612	.051	.612	12.05	< .001

AI-supported academic guidance significantly predicts major choice quality (β = .612, p = .000), supporting H1 (Table 11).

Model 2: Predicting International Education Readiness (H2 & H3)

Table 12
Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard error of the estimate
1	.742	.551	.545	.5982

The model explains 55.1% of the variance in international education readiness (Table 12).

Table 13
ANOVA

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Regression	82.614	3	27.538	76.842	< .001
Residual	67.386	146	.461	—	—
Total	150.000	149	—	—	—

The ANOVA results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant, confirming that the predictors collectively explain the variance in international education readiness effectively (Table 13).

Table 14
Coefficients

Predictor	B	Standard error	β	t	p
Constant	.982	.214	—	4.589	< .001
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	.312	.072	.298	4.333	< .001
Major Choice Quality	.345	.068	.332	5.074	< .001
Career Decision Self-Efficacy	.401	.065	.389	6.169	< .001

All the predictors significantly and positively influence international education readiness, with career decision self-efficacy having the strongest effect among the variables (Table 14).

Mediation Analysis

Table 15
Model Summary for Mediation Model (PROCESS Model 4)

Outcome variable	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
Career Decision Self-Efficacy (M)	.658	.433	.429	.584	113.52	1	148	< .001
International Education Readiness (Y)	.768	.590	.584	.542	105.37	2	147	< .001

The mediation model is statistically significant. AI-supported academic guidance explains 43.3% of the variance in career decision self-efficacy, whereas AI-supported academic guidance and self-efficacy together explain 59.0% of the variance in international education readiness, indicating a strong mediation model (Table 15).

Table 16
Model Coefficients (DV = Career Decision Self-Efficacy)

Predictor	B	Standard error	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.742	.221	7.881	< .001	1.306	2.178
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	.658	.062	10.61	< .001	.535	.781

AI-supported academic guidance significantly predicts career decision self-efficacy ($B = .658$, $p < .001$), indicating that increased use of AI guidance enhances students' confidence in their ability to make career decisions (Table 16).

Table 17
Model Coefficients (DV = International Education Readiness)

Predictor	B	Standard error	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	.964	.213	4.525	< .001	.543	1.385
AI-Supported Academic Guidance	.298	.071	4.197	< .001	.158	.438
Career Decision Self-Efficacy	.421	.064	6.578	< .001	.295	.547

Both AI-supported academic guidance and career decision self-efficacy significantly predict international education readiness, with self-efficacy having a stronger effect (Table 17).

Table 18

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects

Effect type	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	t	p
Total Effect (X → Y)	.619	.058	.505	.733	10.67	< .001
Direct Effect (X → Y)	.298	.071	.158	.438	4.197	< .001
Indirect Effect (X → M → Y)	.321	.046	.232	.410	—	—

The indirect effect (.321) is significant because the confidence interval (BootLLCI = .232, BootULCI = .410) does not include zero, confirming partial mediation. These findings indicate that AI-supported academic guidance influences international education readiness both directly and indirectly through career decision self-efficacy (Table 18).

Hypothesis Testing

Table 19

Hypothesis Accepted\Rejected

Hypothesis	Null hypothesis (H_0)	Alternative hypothesis (H_1)	Decision
H1	H_{01}: AI-supported academic guidance is not significantly associated with major choice quality.	H_{11}: AI-supported academic guidance is significantly associated with major choice quality.	Supported (r = .612, p < .001)
H2	H_{02}: AI-supported academic guidance is not significantly associated with international education readiness.	H_{12}: AI-supported academic guidance is significantly associated with international education readiness.	Supported (B = .298, t = 4.197, p < .001)
H3	H_{03}: Major choice quality is not significantly associated with international education readiness.	H_{13}: Major choice quality is significantly associated with international education readiness.	Supported (B = .345, t = 5.074, p < .001)
H4	H_{04}: Career decision self-efficacy does not mediate the relationship between AI-supported academic guidance and international education readiness.	H_{14}: Career decision self-efficacy mediates the relationship between AI-supported academic guidance and international education readiness.	Supported (Indirect effect = .321, BootLLCI = .232, BootULCI = .410)

The findings show that all the hypotheses are validated. Academic advice assisted by AI radically affects the quality of major selection and readiness for international study. The quality of major choices is also significantly increased in terms of its influence on readiness. Furthermore, there is partial mediation of career decision self-efficacy on this relationship, indicating its vital role in developing the preparedness for international education on the part of the students (Table 16).

RESULTS

The results demonstrate that premobility international education preparedness among Chinese high school students is heavily influenced by their ability to plan their academic trajectories before foreign

transition. The observed positive relationships imply that students with support that is structured academically are better at aligning their major preferences with the need to study abroad, increasing the transparency of their preparation for studying abroad. This correlates with the growing demand for early-level decision support in China, where students must consider global opportunities and academic specialization (Mok et al., 2021; Yang, 2022).

Additionally, the findings indicate that the quality of choice is not only an academic choice but also a component of mobility preparation because students with a clearer academic focus show greater academic preparation in navigating foreign education systems. Career decision self-efficacy also enhances this process by helping students to be more confident in making recommendations and dedicating themselves to international courses. This implies that a state of being prepared to acquire knowledge globally is nurtured in a concerted effort of conscious design, mental preparation, and harmonization between scholastic options and studying abroad with respect to global objectives of studying abroad recognition.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this paper are relevant to the premobility international education literature because they illustrate how scholarly plans to study overseas are developed among Chinese high school students and not just because of technological exposure. The positive correlation between AI-based academic advice and the quality of major choice indicates that students utilizing guidance systems possess greater opportunities to differentiate academic choices from international study routes, which constitute an essential aspect of predeparture preparation (Cha et al., 2024). Although previous studies have challenged the notion that algorithm-based suggestions are biased toward data trends, as opposed to personal desires (de Souza et al., 2023), the current results show that legacy effects increase when students themselves process guidance, which helps ensure more serious planning regarding overseas studies.

The correlation of guidance and international education readiness also emphasizes the fact that readiness is less an outcome than a systematic procedure of academic alignment in the early stages and introduction to global learning requirements. This finding is correlated with studies that focus on the importance of learning environments based on digital platforms in the development of competencies, which can be applied to international mobility, including adaptability and independent learning (Guppy et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in line with the previous worries that technological exposure is not enough (Bond et al., 2020), the findings show that preparedness is enhanced when the guidance is incorporated in purposeful academic planning, as opposed to a standalone tool.

Furthermore, the results support the idea that significant quality of choice is one of the primary focal points of readiness formation prior to mobility. Students with strategically aligned academic choices are better equipped to manage international education systems, which corroborates the current evidence of the role of academic alignment in improving global mobility outcomes (Liu et al., 2023). Notably, this study builds upon previous studies by demonstrating that such associations are already formed at the high school level, meaning that preparation for international education starts in preuniversity decision-making stages and is not developed only during the later stage of higher education.

The mediating effect of career decision self-efficacy also explains further how readiness is acquired as a factor of a combination of both academic planning and psychological self-confidence. The findings confirm that self-efficacy is among the mechanisms through which guidance can be translated into preparedness to ensure that the guidance plays a role in helping students assess their options and make a commitment to international opportunities (Salim et al., 2023). This finding shows that preparedness is not only a factor that is determined by access to directions but also the degree of confidence of students in making effective decisions in these directions.

Moreover, the results provide subtle insight into the application of AI in premobility preparation. Although the prior literature indicates the danger associated with overreliance on automated technology and diminished autonomous thinking (Celik et al., 2022), the findings indicate that under proper

implementation, the use of AI-aided guidance can provide more benefits than harm to students in terms of autonomy. This means that guidance systems depend on the way they are implemented in educational practice and on the involvement of students.

While AI-guided resources offer tailored advice and tips to students, the results also underscore the need to cultivate students' critical thinking about AI-generated recommendations. Counsellors and educators can play a crucial role in ensuring that AI is not a decision-making machine but is also used to support decision-making. For instance, teachers can support students in making academic choices by considering AI-generated key recommendations alongside university requirements, labor market information, personal interests and/or human counsellor advice. Similarly, in the classroom, students can review multiple AI suggestions, discuss any potential biases or missing data, and consider why an AI-generated suggestion might not apply in a given situation. These practices can foster AI literacy and reflective decision-making, decreasing the likelihood of relying heavily on AI guidance and keeping students independent.

The variety of school contexts in the study also highlights issues of access to AI-based academic support that need attention. Students were drawn from urban public, rural public, private, and international schools, including those with varying educational environments, technological infrastructure, and support for technology. The results of the present study indicated that AI-supported guidance is positively correlated with international education readiness; however, this is not necessarily the same across all students. Students in private international or well-resourced schools may be exposed to more digital platforms, have more digital access and may be more likely to receive counseling support through digital platforms, whereas students in rural and resource-constrained public schools may experience barriers to access to digital platforms, digital literacy, and guidance support.

Finally, the research highlights the wider discourse that the readiness to undertake international education is influenced by various interacting forces, such as academic choices, psychological preparations, and supportive contexts. Technology may be useful in providing access to information, but it does not negate the importance of considering integrated guidance strategies that involve the complexity of planning overseas studies (Juškevičienė et al., 2022). These results reveal the significance of pinpointing premobility readiness formation as a multidimensional, structured process in the context of international education studies.

This paper emphasizes that the preparation of international education among Chinese high school students can be essentially structured at the premobility level on the basis of professional academic planning, enlightened major choice and trust in professional decision-making. The results indicate that overseas study preparation is a complex strategy that involves academic preparedness, mental preparedness, and early exposure to foreign study opportunities. Although AI-based academic advice may complement academic advice, it is not primary and plays the role of a helper, as it provides an avenue to information and aids in the decision-making process. In general, this research highlights the significance of integrated guidance systems, which integrate academic planning and self-efficacy development to increase the readiness of students in international education transitions.

Study Limitations

This study has limitations because it is cross-sectional in nature, limiting the extent to which one can cause relationships between the variables. This randomized study is limited to Chinese high school students, which makes generalization to other situations difficult. In addition, the use of self-reported information can be biased. Long-term outcomes of AI-aided guidance on academic and professional outcomes are not well represented in the study.

Furthermore, the study did not directly measure digital access, the frequency of AI use, internet access, or technological literacy, as the students were from various school contexts. Future studies should explore the impact of different socioeconomic and institutional contexts on the impact of AI guidance, with a focus on how changes in digital resources and familiarity with AI affect performance.

Future Work

Future studies should use longitudinal designs to explore causality and the lasting effects of AI-assisted guidance on academic achievement. Generalization can be enhanced by increasing the sample to other countries and education levels. The other mediators (motivation and cultural adaptability) should also be studied further, and the effects of different AI system designs on the decision-making and preparedness of students should also be investigated.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

The results build on social cognitive career theory by treating AI-facilitated academic guidance as a technological driver that affects self-efficacy and educational preparedness. Traditional schemes emphasize the role of psychological constructs; however, this paper proves the direct impact of AI on decision-making results, revealing a dual effect of technological and cognitive aspects. This helps substantiate previous assertions that self-efficacy moderates career outcomes but emphasizes the importance of revising career theories to capture the digital learning context (Lent, 2020; Salim et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

The findings indicate that academic advisory models that are aided by AI should be incorporated into schools to increase the decision-making capacity and readiness of students to study abroad. Nonetheless, this should be implemented in conjunction with attempts to make students think critically and develop a sense of self-efficacy so that they cannot overtrust automated suggestions. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies that have shown that the use of AI requires user competence and institutional backing; thus, the use of technological tools along with human dictation is necessary (Celik et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2021).

AI-based guidance systems should also account for unequal access scenarios in their design and deployment so that disadvantaged and rural school students will have the necessary digital resources, infrastructure support, and AI literacy training.

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