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The Role of Adjustment to University Life in the Academic Performance of International Students

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ABSTRACT: *Australian universities have seen a significant increase in Asian international students. In the current higher education environment, these students encounter various challenges in their adjustment to a new university environment, making it necessary to monitor their academic progress. The current study predicted a positive relationship between university adjustment and academic performance among first-year Asian international students in Australia. An online survey was used to collect data from 64 first-year undergraduate Asian international students at Monash University, Australia. The results revealed that adjustment to university is a significant predictor of academic performance. This supports past findings that students are negatively impacted academically if they struggle to adjust socially and emotionally to university and highlights the need for universities and home country schools to offer additional interventions to help Asian international students. The study provides impetus for future research to investigate interventions that assist international students in adapting better to Australian university life and excelling academically.*

Keywords: academic performance, social adjustment, emotional adjustment, higher education, international students

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The surge in Asian international student enrollment has significantly benefited the Australian economy, as education services have become the nation's fourth largest export, with foreign student fees and expenses playing an important role (Austrade, 2015). Despite the undeniable economic benefits Asian international students bring to Australia, students face various challenges during their first year of university. The complexities these students face when adapting to Western life must be better understood, as they are an important asset to the country. However, compared to other student demographics, Asian international students face greater difficulties adjusting to Australian universities. These challenges include, but are not limited to, disparities in cultural and educational environments, language, and social adjustment (Zhai, 2004; Andrade, 2006; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002), which can lead to poor academic achievement for these students (Kambouropoulos, 2014). While some students eventually adjust, building self-confidence to overcome transitional difficulties, others remain unable to do so (Rahim, 2025; Coles & Swami, 2012). Thus, to assist these students in reaching their full academic potential, it is essential to understand the issues they encounter when transitioning to an Australian university and the skills needed to overcome adjustment difficulties.

University Adjustment Problems: Contributing Factors

Transitioning from high school to university can be a demanding experience for all first-year students (Parker et al., 2004; Morton et al., 2013). However, international students pursuing a degree outside their home countries face even more unique challenges than their domestic peers. Specifically, international students face three primary sources of difficulty in adjusting to university: academic, social, and emotional maladjustment (Chaliawala et al., 2025; Gebhand, 2012). Anderson (1994) defines adjustment as "working toward a fit between the person and the new environment, which refers to people trying to adapt to a change of situations" (p. 299). This concept is especially pertinent for international students transitioning to universities in Australia, as they possess distinct values, traditions, and norms that differ from those of their host country, requiring them to acclimatize to these cultural discrepancies to successfully adjust to university (Rienties et al., 2011).

International students frequently experience 'culture shock', which refers to the anxiety experienced from being exposed to unfamiliar cultural features and

social norms (Oberg, 1960). Cultural shock can be particularly distressing for international students transitioning to a new culture, especially when encountering differences in accommodations, food, climates, values, traditions, behaviors, and languages (Lin & Yi, 1997; Pedersen, 1991). The experience of culture shock may result in negative mental health conditions that include anxiety, anger, confusion, irritability, depression, loneliness, and the need for a more familiar environment (Chaliawala et al., 2025; Oberg, 1960; Upadhyay, 2018). In addition, these negative emotions can be further exacerbated by a lack of direct access to social support from one's home country, such as family and friends. Over time, the accumulative effects of such emotions can exhaust international students' psychological and physical resources, thus weakening their ability to cope with academic pressures and resulting in negative outcomes such as poor academic performance (Lin & Yi, 1997; Misra & Castillo, 2004). These barriers to adjustment manifest considerable hardships for international students, especially those whose cultures significantly differ from that of the host country.

Therefore, Asian international students arguably experience a more complex process of adjustment compared to other demographic groups due to their considerable cultural differences from Australia (Yue & Le, 2010). These disparities can lead to increased difficulties for Asian international students attempting to assimilate into Australian universities, as students from Asian nations tend to possess collectivist cultural values that prioritize interdependence, respect, and group identity (Littlewood, 1999). This is in stark contrast to the individualistic values held in Australian society, which emphasize personal autonomy, independence, and self-reliance (Vandello & Cohen, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, 2009). Furnham and Alibhai (1985) introduced the concept of "cultural distance," which posits that international students of certain nationalities may find the cultural adjustment process more arduous and prolonged when the host culture's values differ considerably from the student's home culture. For instance, Asian international students experience more difficulty adapting to the Australian milieu than British international students due to their shared individualistic cultural values (Yue & Le, 2010). Consequently, Asian international students must exert more effort to adjust to their new cultural environment than other demographic groups to transition more smoothly and achieve academic success in Australian universities. Tinto's retention theory posits that students are more likely to persist in higher education when they are academically and socially integrated into the institution, investing in their college experience and creating a sense of belonging (Tinto, 2023).

In addition, differences in educational systems present another significant barrier to the adjustment of Asian international students to the university. As learning styles are primarily predetermined by culture (Joy & Kolb, 2009; Wong, 2004), international students from Asian countries may experience "academic culture shock," which is an incongruent schema about higher education that results from a change in educational context (Gilbert, 2000) and can cause a great deal of distress due to the differences between schooling in Asia and Australia (Joy & Kolb, 2009; Wong, 2004).

Students from Asian countries are often ill prepared to navigate the cultural nuances of Western education when they arrive (Yue & Le, 2010). In comparison to the Asian education system, where rote learning, didactic, and authoritarian passive-receptive teaching are emphasized (Wong, 2004; Hammond & Gao, 2002; Holmes, 2004), Western pedagogy encourages an individualistic approach that values self-directed learning, critical thinking, questioning, debate, and analysis (Stoeger et al., 2021; Durkin, 2008). Such educational approaches are not traditionally accepted in Eastern cultures because they are perceived as disrespectful in challenging the educator's authority and knowledge, given that these cultures tend to follow collectivist values that highly honor teacher guidance and expertise (Taylor & Ali, 2017; Durkin, 2008). These contrasting academic backgrounds have been found to adversely affect Asian international students' academic performance, manifesting in a reluctance to engage in classroom discussions, an unwillingness to give opinions, and passivity in class, leading to poorer academic outcomes (Zhang & Mi, 2009; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Wong, 2004).

For students moving to a country with English as the dominant language, proficiency in the language is crucial. However, Samuwelowicz's (1987) seminal research found that learning difficulties experienced by international students studying in Australia were primarily attributed to 'language' and 'study' problems pertaining to a lack of English proficiency. This lack of English proficiency can result in difficulties in understanding teachers' expectations and grading methods (Unruh, 2015; Lin & Yi, 1997), communicating understanding on written exams (Love & Arkoudis, 2006; Robertson et al., 2000), and comprehending terms used in academic discourse (Daller & Phelan, 2013).

Despite meeting university English language entrance requirements, Asian international students may also struggle with adapting to the social milieu of a Western education system (Bayati et al; 2025; Sawir, 2005). Nonnative English speakers may encounter both communication challenges and cultural differences, which can hinder their ability to form relationships and result in feelings of loneliness, isolation, and homesickness (Girmay & Singh, 2019), which can negatively impact academic performance (Andrade, 2009).

Ultimately, Asian international students encounter numerous obstacles upon transitioning to an Australian university due to their differences in culture, language, and educational backgrounds. These circumstances can give rise to academic, social, and emotional difficulties, leading to a decrease in students' academic achievements (Khan et al., 2015). The ability to effectively adjust to a new environment is associated with higher levels of academic performance (Nasir, 2011); however, this can be incredibly challenging, as even seemingly minor cultural disparities between one's home and host culture can make the simplest tasks difficult and give rise to distress. As such, universities should equip Asian international students with the required resources and skills to successfully transition into Australian universities and achieve their highest academic potential.

The Current Study

In light of the substantial growth of international students from Asia over the past decade, there is an essential need to revisit and update our understanding of their adjustment to Australian university life and how this adjustment impacts their academic performance. This transition can be difficult due to the discrepancies between Asian and Western education systems; consequently, many new Asian international students face an increased risk of academic underperformance (Al Jaboori, et al., 2025; Yue & Le, 2010; Wong, 2004). Despite ongoing efforts by Australian universities to support international students, meeting their diverse and evolving needs remains a challenge (Xiong et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2021). Although earlier research has explored university adjustment and academic outcomes among first-year students (Chemers et al., 2001; Alegre, 2014; Mudhovozi, 2012), much of this work predicts significant shifts in global mobility and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies focusing specifically on Asian international students in the Australian context are limited (Mok et al., 2021), therefore providing impetus for both updated and more targeted investigations.

This study addresses this gap by examining the adjustment experiences of first-year Asian international students at a single Australian university. It focuses on how academic, social, and emotional adjustment domains relate to early academic success, offering timely insights into a cohort that remains underrepresented in the current literature. The findings aim to inform future research and institutional support strategies, particularly those tailored to the unique challenges faced by this student population during their initial transition.

The following hypothesis was proposed:

- H₁: We predict that first-year Asian international students' adjustment to university (high-scoring Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire) will be positively related to academic performance (high-scoring recent assignment grades).

METHOD

The participants of this study were first-year Asian international students enrolled in an undergraduate degree at Monash University, Australia, during semester one of 2023. The total sample consisted of 64 participants. To ensure that the sample size was of sufficient power, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power v3.1.9.4.

Participants were aged between 18 and 28 years old (M=19.95 years; SD=2.31). Of these, 47 (73.44%) identified as female, and 17 (26.56%) as male. To be eligible, participants had to self-identify as Asian ethnicity, have moved to Australia within the past 12 months, have completed secondary school (or equivalent) in an Asian country, be 18 years of age or older, and be living independently; housemates and dormitories were permitted, but living with family members was not. Those who had undertaken any prior tertiary degrees,

intermissions, or deferred degrees were excluded from the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. Participants answered basic demographic questions, including their age, gender, enrollment level, nationality, and native language.

University Adjustment

The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1984) was used to measure participants' adjustment to university. Internal consistency for the SACQ subscales in this study was acceptable: Academic Adjustment subscale ($\alpha = .84$), Social Adjustment subscale ($\alpha = .88$), and Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale ($\alpha = .82$). These values are consistent with those reported in the original validation study by Baker & Siryk (1984), which ranged from $\alpha = .81$ to $\alpha = .91$. The overall reliability for the composite SACQ score in our sample was $\alpha = .89$.

Academic Performance

Students self-reported their most recent major assignment grade (e.g., any written assessment, projects, portfolio, reviews, reflections, or laboratory reports) as a measure of academic performance. This is particularly applicable to first-year university students whose grade point average data have yet to be determined. Grades are a reliable indicator of a student's capabilities, comprehension, and adherence to educational requirements and can effectively reflect students' learning outcomes and mastery of a subject (Airasian, 2011; DeVito, 2007; Snowman & Biehler, 2003).

Design

The study utilized a cross-sectional within-group correlational design to predict a positive association between university adjustment and academic performance. The hypothesis specified university adjustment as the predictor variable and academic performance as the outcome variable. This study was granted ethics approval by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: 38163, see Appendix B).

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling between May 10 and July 1, 2023. Recruitment flyers were distributed in person across the Monash University campus. All eligible participants completed the online survey through Qualtrics, accessed via the link or QR code provided in the recruitment flyer or email, on their own device. The survey, including the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), took approximately 30 minutes, and participants completed it at a time suitable to them. All eligible participants who completed the entire survey received a \$15 voucher reimbursement by providing their student email address at the end of the survey.

Data Analysis

Data were screened and cleaned using the JASP database (v0.17.1). Prior to statistical analysis, appropriate assumption testing was performed on the data, and a statistical significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was set.

To assess the hypothesis, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using the JASP database (v0.17.1) to examine the correlation between university adjustment and academic performance. The utilization of a Pearson correlation analysis facilitated the examination of the strength and direction of the linear association between the two continuous variables (Goodwin & Leech, 2006). Finally, a linear regression analysis was conducted using the Jamovi database (v2.3.28.0) to determine whether university adjustment predicted academic performance.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the mean and standard deviation of the study variables, including Academic Performance and SACQ presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Academic Performance and University Adjustment

Variable	Academic Performance	SACQ
<i>N</i>	64	64
<i>M</i>	7.47	280.45
<i>SD</i>	1.08	63.08

Note. SACQ = University Adjustment.

University Adjustment and Academic Performance

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between university adjustment and academic performance in first-year Asian international students (hypothesis 1). The analyses revealed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between university adjustment and academic performance, $r = 0.60, p < .001$. First-year Asian international students' level of perceived university adjustment was positively associated with their academic performance (see Figure 1).

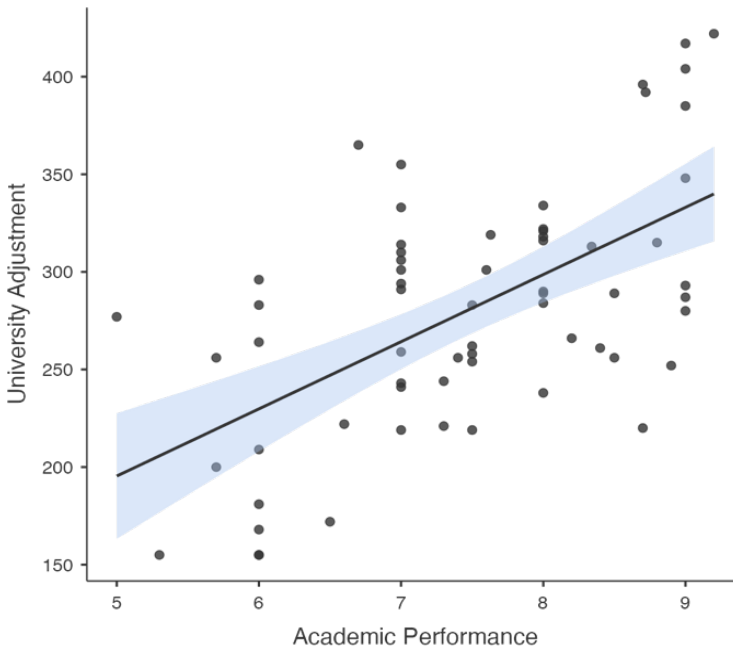


Figure 1. Correlation Between University Adjustment and Academic Performance

Note. Figure 1 depicts the positive correlation between university adjustment, the predictor variable, and academic performance, the outcome variable. An increase in one variable is associated with an increase in the other variable.

In the present study, the predictive relationship between academic performance and university adjustment (as measured by SACQ scores) was examined using a simple linear regression model. A dataset encompassing 64 participants was analyzed, correlating assignment grades to respective SACQ values. The average age within the sample was 20 years ($SD = 2.31$), and the average assignment grade was 7.47 ($SD = 1.08$). The linear regression analysis, conducted using the Jamovi database (v2.3.28.0), revealed a statistically significant model, ($F(1, 62) = 34.6, p < .001$), with an adjusted R^2 of .35. This finding suggests that SACQ scores account for approximately 35% of the variance in academic performance among the sampled individuals. This effect size is considered moderate, highlighting the substantial role that university adjustment plays in academic performance.

Furthermore, the regression coefficient for SACQ scores was found to be .10, with a standard error of .002. This positive relationship between SACQ scores and assignment grades was statistically significant, $t(62) = 5.88, p < .001$,

demonstrating the predictive power of university adjustment on academic performance.

In addition to the regression analysis, a scatterplot with the fitted regression line was examined to ensure that the model assumptions were met. The residuals were normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk $W = 0.98$, $p = .43$), and homoscedasticity was confirmed through a visual inspection of the residual versus predicted plot. The residuals appeared to be independent (Durbin-Watson $D = 1.58$, $p = .08$).

These results emphasize the significance of university adjustment as a determinant of academic performance. The apparent linear trend observed in the scatterplot, alongside the significant regression coefficient, underscores the importance of considering university adjustment in assessing academic performance in first-year international Asian students studying in Australian universities.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to provide a preliminary examination of the correlation between university adjustment and academic performance among first-year Asian international students. We predicted that first-year Asian international students' adjustment to university would be positively related to their academic performance. Our results supported this hypothesis, as there was a moderate, positive, and significant relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, adjustment to university is a significant predictor of academic performance in first-year Asian international students.

University Adjustment and Academic Performance

This study confirmed the hypothesis that first-year Asian international students' university adjustment predicts their academic performance. This suggests that students who adjusted better to university in Australia had higher academic success, whereas those who struggled with adjustment had lower academic success within our sample. The study primarily focused on adjustment across three domains, namely, academic, social, and emotional adjustment. Our results indicate that students who encountered difficulties across all domains collectively exhibited diminished levels of academic attainment. These findings support Gebhard's (2012) theoretical framework, which identifies these three domains as the main obstacles to academic success for international students in universities. Our study underscores the importance of successful adjustment in these areas for Asian international students to achieve high academic performance in an Australian university.

The ability of first-year Asian international students to adjust to an Australian university can have a significant impact on their academic performance. This is due to cultural idiosyncrasies between Asian and Western educational styles, referred to as the "Paradox of the Asian Learner" (Wedding & Chin, 2013). This theory argues that Asian international students face unique academic challenges

that can adversely affect their academic performance when entering a Western education setting (Wedding & Chin, 2013; King & Bernardo, 2016). Our results support this theory, as Asian students who struggled to adapt to the cultural and academic shock of an Australian university displayed poorer academic performance. Furthermore, Dobinson (2020) argued that Western pedagogy in Australian universities places Asian students at a disadvantage, as they must modify, adjust, or even reject their cultural values to succeed in Australian universities. Thus, the inability to adapt to academic differences has been identified as a significant factor contributing to poor academic achievement in international students (Telbis et al., 2014). However, those who successfully navigate these academic differences achieve higher academic success, as they tend to engage more in class, understand academic discourse, and comprehend assignment requirements (Yue & Le, 2010; Martirosyan et al., 2015). In line with previous research, our findings suggest that first-year Asian international students who successfully adjusted to the disparities between Asian and Western education performed better academically than those who adjusted poorly to the academic differences.

Moreover, our findings concur with previous research demonstrating a significant correlation between social adjustment and academic performance (Rosenthal et al., 2006; Neri & Ville, 2008). Research has found that Asian international students have difficulty understanding colloquial language and accents, making it challenging to form friendships with local students and their educators (Holmes, 2004; Lindner & Margetts, 2021). Similarly, Zhao et al. (2023) also revealed that the cultural disparities between Asian and Western students create social barriers, leading to social isolation and dissatisfaction with university integration, adversely affecting academic achievement. In accordance with previous research, our results suggest that students who struggled with social adjustment were less likely to succeed academically than those who displayed more robust social adjustment.

Furthermore, the current findings indicate that successful emotional adjustment is linked to higher academic performance. This is consistent with previous research showing that emotional adjustment positively correlates with academic performance (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Ebert et al., 2019; Sancu et al., 2022). Students with high emotional adjustment are better able to resolve challenges and overcome the stressors of the new culture, which can result in positive adaptation and better well-being (Sun & Nolan, 2021). This is especially important when transitioning into a foreign academic setting, as transitional challenges can lead to adverse emotional outcomes such as anxiety, irritability, isolation, and depression, destabilizing students' emotional and psychological resources (Upadhyay, 2018; Lin & Yi, 1997). Thus, emotionally adjusted students can perform better in their new environment, producing higher academic results (Gray, 2002). Our findings support prior research and suggest that Asian international students who overcome emotional challenges and demonstrate effective emotional adjustment achieve increased academic achievement.

Ultimately, our study contributes to the literature by highlighting a significant correlation between university adjustment and academic performance. These

findings emphasize the importance of addressing the academic, social, and emotional challenges that first-year Asian international students face when transitioning to Australian universities to promote academic success.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the scope of this study was to provide preliminary trends and findings, it does provide an insightful and up-to-date analysis of a major factor that may impact academic success among first-year Asian international students in a foreign university. The preliminary nature of this study did have limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, a cross-sectional study design was used to assess the relationship between these variables at a specific point in time. Using this method, we were able to examine the students' adjustment during the early stages of their academic transition. This design, however, does not allow us to attribute causality between the variables. As a result, our study was unable to determine whether an increase in university adjustment directly leads to improved academic performance.

Future research should utilize a longitudinal design to examine the relationship between university adjustment over the academic year. This will allow for a better understanding of the causality between these variables on academic performance (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). This would facilitate a deeper exploration of the potential impact of these variables on their academic achievement. Additionally, it will enable us to examine students' adjustment throughout different phases of their university progression, potentially identifying students who are more vulnerable to adjustment problems.

Second, although the sample size ($N = 64$) was sufficient for detecting a moderate effect size per power analysis. Future research could expand on these findings by including students from diverse academic disciplines and institutions or by employing comparative designs across multiple universities.

Moreover, the scope of this study was to establish baseline trends in current Asian student cohorts in Australia; as such, the study relied on students' self-reported recent assignment grades to measure academic performance from recent major assignments. Given that the participants were students from various disciplines, their assignments may have differed. While practical for first-year students without GPA data, attempts were made to control this by specifying major assignments rather than tests, orals, or group projects. However, this measure may be influenced by subject type or student perception. There may still be potential variability among the types of assignments submitted, which could have affected the results. Additionally, self-reported grades may not accurately reflect the student's true academic abilities, as students may have selectively reported their highest grades in any of their undertaken units. This can create a potential response bias and an inflated perception of their academic capabilities (Hishinuma et al., 2001).

Future studies should consider incorporating a more comprehensive measure of academic performance. This could include student academic transcripts, cumulative course grades and cumulative GPAs, which would reduce response bias (Hishinuma et al., 2001). These measures would provide a more objective

and reliable assessment of a student's academic performance across all units and assignments, ensuring greater reliability and comparability across participants (Richardson et al., 2012). Additionally, future studies should consider having a larger and more homogeneous sample to increase generalizability, such as students from the same discipline, as they will have the same assignments. This will allow for more explanatory power of academic performance and control for potential confounding variables.

Furthermore, the study did not control for prior educational backgrounds and English proficiency, which need to be controlled to accurately measure the impact on students' adaptation to university life. While not measuring academic background allows for generalizability, it raises concerns about its potential influence on the relationships between the studied variables. Some students may have attended international or International Baccalaureate schools with Western teaching and assessment methods, exposing them to a global education style. These schools often have native English-speaking teachers and instruction in English, facilitating familiarity with language nuances and speech patterns (Perry & Vlachopoulos, 2023). According to Wong (2004), students with limited exposure to Western education are disadvantaged when adjusting to Australian universities compared to students familiar with Western education. Therefore, future research should aim for a more homogenous sample of students by controlling for educational background.

English proficiency may have impacted the relationship between university adjustment and academic performance. While participants' native language was recorded, their prior academic background and level of English proficiency were not explicitly measured. Previous research has shown that English proficiency affects adjustment to an English-speaking environment and academic success (Robertson et al., 2000; Bayley et al., 2002; Daller & Phelan, 2013). Even though all students met the language requirements, there may have been significant differences in their English abilities, which could impact the relationship between variables.

To improve future studies, it is recommended to incorporate reliable measures of language proficiency, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), to assess students' skills in both academic and conversational English (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000). Additionally, prior secondary schooling and socioeconomic status should be measured to accurately assess the effect of university adjustment on academic success. This will offer a deeper understanding of how English proficiency may impact the variables in this study.

Implications

This study provides valuable insight for Australian universities seeking to better support their Asian international student population. By highlighting the complex challenges faced by first-year Asian international students, the findings demonstrate the need for culturally responsive interventions and teaching practices. The observed positive relationship between university adjustment and academic performance suggests that institutions should move beyond general

support services and implement targeted strategies that facilitate smoother transitions. These may include prearrival orientation programs, culturally informed mentorship initiatives, and resources designed to help students navigate both educational and cultural differences.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of collaboration between Australian universities and educators in students' home countries. Such partnerships could help better prepare students for the academic expectations and learning environments they will encounter. To support this, educators in Australia would benefit from professional development in cultural awareness and competence, enabling them to foster inclusive classrooms through culturally responsive pedagogy.

Educators should also reflect on how their teaching content and methods can be adapted to support international students' transition into the Australian higher education system. A key factor in successful adjustment is a student's general self-perception, which plays a critical role in their ability to adapt (Yusoff, 2011) and is linked to Tinto's retention theory that successful adjustment leads to a greater sense of belonging in the Australian university (Tinto, 2023). These findings provide a foundation for future research to explore additional factors that may enhance university adjustment and inform the development of more effective support mechanisms for international students.

CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to investigate the relationship between university adjustment and the academic performance of first-year Asian international students in Australia. The study demonstrated both a positive relationship and that university adjustment is a significant predictor of academic performance. This study highlights the difficulties Asian international students face in their first year at an Australian university upon transitioning from a secondary school in Asia. This emphasizes the importance of both preparing students in their home country and incorporating content and learning strategies to help in their transition to university during their first year of university, ultimately promoting academic success. Furthermore, this study highlights the need for additional research on other possible factors to better understand their effects on first-year Asian international students positively adjusting to life in Australian universities.

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