



Managing cross-cultural transitions: Institutional support strategies for international students in higher education

Wu Jiewei¹, Aan Komariah², Dedy Achmad Kurniady³, Sururi⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Kota Bandung, Indonesia

wujiwei@upi.edu¹, aan_komariah@upi.edu², dedy_achmad@upi.edu³, sururi@upi.edu⁴

ABSTRACT

International students often encounter unfamiliar pedagogical systems, cultural dissonance, or marginalization that can affect them academically and psychologically. This article systematically reviews Scopus-indexed articles (2020-2026) that address institutional support for international students during cross-cultural transitions in higher education, following the PRISMA 2020 reporting procedure. A narrative thematic analysis was conducted on 14 studies that met the inclusion criteria. The synthesis of findings indicates that cross-cultural adaptation is co-constructed by individual capabilities such as cultural intelligence, coping, motivation, and communication competencies, as well as institutional conditions that support access, belonging, and cultural sensitivity. Effective academic and social support is reflected in inclusive learning environments, connectedness to the host community, and coordinated administrative support. Furthermore, recent findings emphasize the importance of the digital ecology as an additional layer of support that facilitates student access, inclusion, and psychological well-being. The results of this review inform the design of a systematically integrated, phased support model and highlight the need for longitudinal, multi-site evaluation.

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ABSTRAK

Mahasiswa internasional sering kali menghadapi sistem pedagogis yang tidak familiar, disonansi budaya, atau pengalaman marginalisasi yang dapat memengaruhi mereka secara akademis maupun psikologis. Artikel ini secara sistematis meninjau artikel terindeks Scopus (2020-2026) yang membahas dukungan kelembagaan bagi mahasiswa internasional selama transisi lintas budaya dalam pendidikan tinggi dengan mengikuti prosedur pelaporan PRISMA 2020. Analisis tematik naratif dilakukan terhadap 14 studi yang memenuhi kriteria inklusi. Sintesis temuan menunjukkan bahwa adaptasi lintas budaya dikonstruksi bersama oleh kapabilitas individu seperti kecerdasan budaya, koping, motivasi, dan kompetensi komunikasi, serta kondisi institusional yang mendukung akses, rasa memiliki, dan kepekaan budaya. Dukungan akademik dan sosial yang efektif tercermin dari lingkungan pembelajaran yang inklusif, keterhubungan dengan komunitas tuan rumah, serta pendampingan administratif yang terkoordinasi. Selain itu, temuan terbaru menekankan pentingnya peran ekologi digital sebagai lapisan dukungan tambahan yang memfasilitasi akses, inklusi, dan kesejahteraan psikologis mahasiswa. Hasil ulasan ini memberikan masukan bagi perancangan model dukungan yang terintegrasi secara sistematis dan bertahap, serta menyoroti perlunya evaluasi multi-situs secara longitudinal.

Kata Kunci: adaptasi lintas budaya; dukungan digital; dukungan institusional; integrasi sosial; mahasiswa internasional; pendidikan tinggi

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has accelerated rapidly over the past two decades, transforming universities into globally interconnected institutions (Franch, 2020; Hung & Yen, 2022). This movement of international students not only parallels the increase in knowledge economies but also represents a strategic positioning for many institutions as they seek to improve their academic standing, financial sustainability, and cultural engagement (Nakhbayeva & Beregovaya, 2024; Zhou *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, international students have become an integral part of higher education systems worldwide. However, beyond contributing positively to institutional globalization, these students often face complex issues as they transition into new cultural, academic, and social environments.

Cross-cultural transition is a multi-dimensional process comprising academic adaptation, social integration, psychological adjustment, and identity negotiation (Huang *et al.*, 2025; Nie & Zarei, 2023). Due to cultural differences and language barriers, overseas students often encounter unfamiliar pedagogical systems, cultural dissonance, or experiences of marginalization that can affect them academically and psychologically (Le & Nguyen, 2025; Weber *et al.*, 2025). Established theoretical perspectives, including acculturation theory, student integration models, and transition theory, consistently emphasize the role of institutional environment in determining students' adjustment rather than emphasizing solely individual capacity. This demonstrates the importance of higher education institutions in transitioning students across cultures.

The urgency of this issue is reinforced by recent evidence showing that difficulties in transition are not isolated cases, but part of a broader pattern affecting international students across higher education systems. Globally, the number of internationally mobile tertiary students reached nearly 6.9 million in 2022, indicating that transition-related challenges now affect a very large population of learners, as reported by UNESCO in *Global flow of tertiary-level students*. At the same time, recent national trend data from the United States show a sharp rise in mental health risks among international students between 2015 and 2024, with anxiety increasing from 20.46% to 36.47%, depression from 20.44% to 35.37%, and suicidal ideation from 5.35% to 10.30%, while service utilization increased more slowly (Zhai *et al.*, 2025). These patterns suggest that many students do not transition successfully in psychological and social terms, even when they remain enrolled.

Recent reviews also continue to identify loneliness, social isolation, language barriers, discrimination, and difficulty navigating institutional systems as recurring barriers to successful adjustment (Ansari Lari *et al.*, 2025; Bokayev, 2024). Taken together, these data underscore that ineffective transition is not merely an individual problem, but an urgent institutional concern requiring coordinated and culturally responsive support strategies. A large body of research has examined the various forms of institutional support for international students, including orientation programs, academic advising, language assistance, counseling services, and peer mentoring programs (Diao *et al.*, 2026; Hays *et al.*, 2021). These types of support systems can improve student adjustment and performance (Sun & Davison, 2023). However, the literature remains segmented by discipline and context.

Many studies focus on a single dimension of support, e.g., academic adjustment or psychological well-being, thereby excluding a holistic understanding of how institutional supports, as an integrated system, function (Singh, 2023). Increased attention needs to be devoted to institutional support services across a wider range of academic, practical, and general aspects, given ongoing inconsistencies in their effectiveness, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness for increasingly diverse student populations. Despite the increase in scholarship about this subject, little work has synthesized what actual institutional supports look like from a comprehensive, integrated perspective. Earlier reviews tend to focus on specific features of the international student experience rather than systematically analyzing how institutions design, implement, and align student support systems with a comprehensive perspective on managing cross-cultural transitions (Xu *et al.*, 2026).

The gap is that you likely need a more systematic and critical review of existing research, along with the presentation of major patterns, theoretical orientations, and trends in areas for institutional support. The uniqueness of this study lies in its approach, which offers an integrated understanding of the institutional support for international students' cross-cultural transition. Moving beyond previous work that necessarily considers only one dimension, this analysis also foregrounds domain-level data. It systematically aggregates it into a gross analytical calculation that accounts for academic, social, and psychological support. By doing so, the study contributes to educational administration scholarship by offering a systems-based framework for understanding how institutional strategies shape global higher education contexts for international students.

Thus, this study addresses the major research question: How can higher education institutions conceptualize and design mechanisms and processes to support effective cross-cultural transition for international students in their new context? It aims to identify the species, nature, and adequacy of institutional support mechanisms, as well as research lacunae and emerging trends in the previous literature. Therefore, the purpose of the current article is to conduct a systematic review of the literature on institutional support for international students by: (1) Identifying prevalent themes and trends in existing research, (2) Examining the effectiveness and challenges of current institutional support practices, and (3) Proposing recommendations for future research as well as implications for wider policy development. Through this approach, this study supports the development and enhancement of evidence-based practices in the administration of higher education. It fosters more inclusive and responsive institutional systems for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-Cultural Transition in Higher Education

Cross-cultural transition in higher education is the complex, multidimensional process by which international students adjust to new academic, social, and cultural environments. This transition is not a single event but a continuous process of adaptation involving cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes. Early conceptualizations of this process are rooted in acculturation theory, which explains how individuals navigate between their home and host cultures. Individuals adopt different strategies such as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization, depending on their interaction with the host culture (Yoo, 2021).

In higher education contexts, cross-cultural transition extends beyond cultural adaptation to include academic and institutional adjustment. International students must navigate unfamiliar teaching methods, assessment systems, and communication norms (Huang *et al.*, 2025; Lu *et al.*, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that this transition is influenced by both individual factors (e.g., language proficiency, prior exposure) and contextual factors such as institutional climate and inclusivity. More recent research adopts a systemic perspective, emphasizing that cross-cultural transition is co-constructed through interactions between students and institutional environments rather than being solely an individual responsibility (Xu *et al.*, 2026).

Theoretical Foundations of Student Transition and Adaptation

The literature on international student adaptation is grounded in several influential theoretical frameworks. Acculturation theory remains central in explaining cultural adjustment processes (Yoo, 2021). However, in higher education, this framework is often complemented by student integration models, particularly those proposed by Tinto in his publication entitled "*Leaving College*", which emphasize the importance of academic and social integration in student persistence and success. Tinto argues that students are more likely to succeed when they establish meaningful connections within the institution's academic and social systems.

Another important framework is transition theory, developed by Anderson in "*Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Schlossberg's Theory with Practice in a Diverse World*", which conceptualizes transition as a function of four key factors: situation, self, support, and strategies. This model has been widely applied to understand how students cope with change and adapt to new environments. While these theories provide valuable insights, recent scholarship highlights their limitations when applied in isolation. For instance, acculturation theory often underestimates the influence of institutions, while integration models may overlook cultural diversity and power dynamics (Baker *et al.*, 2019; Eraković & Radić-Bojanić, 2023; Mulyono *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, there is an increasing call for integrative approaches that combine cultural, academic, and institutional perspectives better to explain international student experiences in global higher education contexts.

Institutional Support for International Students

Institutional support plays a pivotal role in facilitating international students' successful transition and academic achievement. Universities have developed various support mechanisms, including orientation programs, academic advising, language support services, counseling, and peer mentoring initiatives (Pöntinen & Rätty-Záborszky, 2020; Singh, 2023). These services are designed to address multiple dimensions of student needs, ranging from academic competencies to psychological well-being. Research shows that structured orientation programs significantly improve students' understanding of academic expectations and institutional systems, thereby easing initial adjustment. Similarly, peer mentoring programs contribute to social integration and reduce feelings of isolation (Singh, 2023; Sun & Davison, 2023).

Language support services are also critical, as language proficiency remains one of the strongest predictors of academic success among international students. Despite these benefits, several studies reveal limitations in institutional support practices. Support services are often fragmented and lack coordination across institutional units. Moreover, many institutions adopt a deficit-oriented approach, viewing international students as needing remediation rather than recognizing their diverse strengths (Singh, 2023). This misalignment can reduce the effectiveness of support systems and limit their impact on student outcomes.

METHODS

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to identify, appraise, and synthesize empirical evidence on institutional support strategies facilitating international students' cross-cultural transitions in higher education.

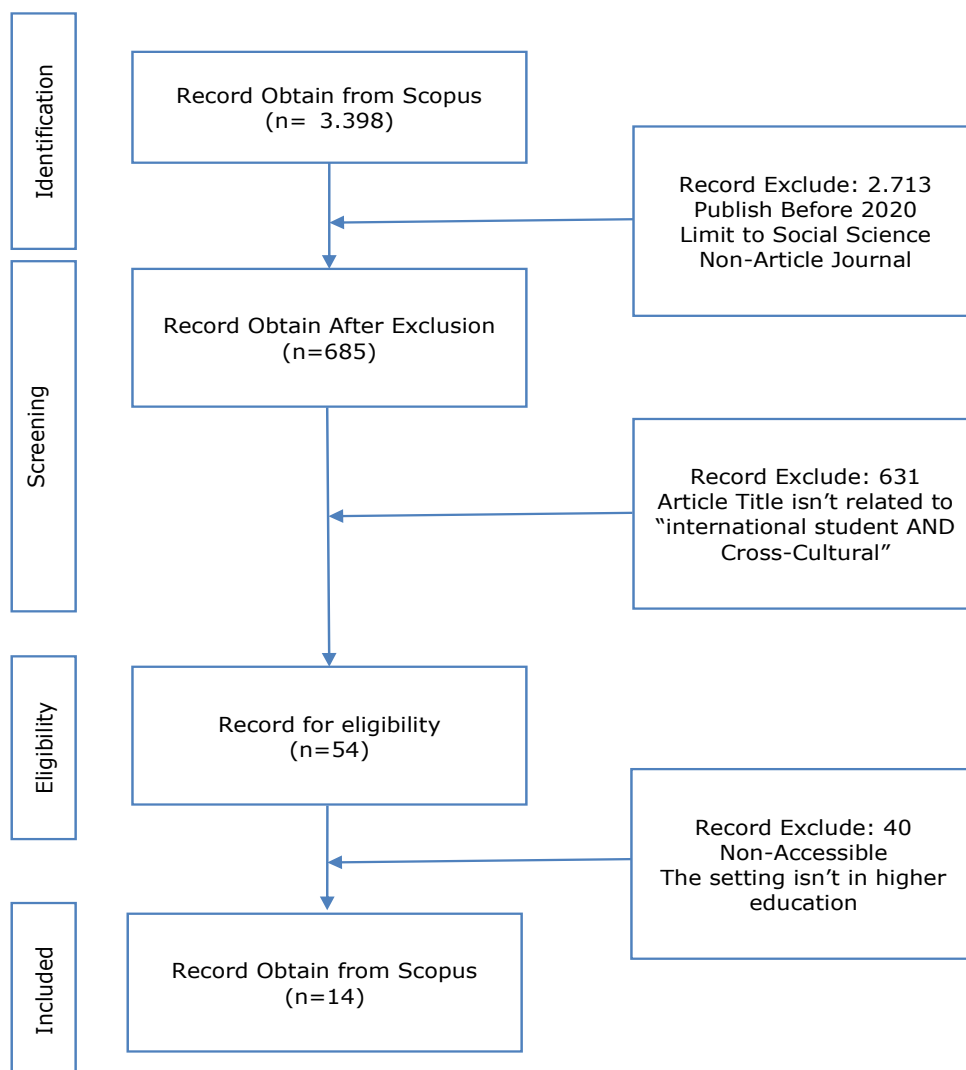


Figure 1. Prisma Flow
Source: Scopus (Processed by the Researcher, 2026)

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines for systematic reviews to enhance transparency and reproducibility across the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis. This study did not include a meta-analysis; instead, the included

studies were synthesized narratively using thematic analysis. The study identification and screening outcomes are summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram (**Figure 1**).

Information Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted exclusively in Scopus, selected for its broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences (Baas *et al.*, 2020). An initial query was executed using the following search string in the Title-Abstract-Keywords fields:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY (international AND student AND cross-cultural)).

The search results were then refined using Scopus filters to align with the review scope, including publication year (from 2020 to April 2026), document type (journal articles), and subject area (Social Sciences). To support replicability, the exact search string and applied limits are reported in this section, and the resulting record flow is documented in the PRISMA diagram (**Figure 1**).

Eligibility Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Database/ Source	Indexed in Scopus.	Not indexed in Scopus.
Publication Year	2020 - 2026.	Published before 2020.
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles.	Conference papers, book chapters, reviews, editorials, notes, dissertations, and other non-article types.
Subject Area	Social Sciences.	Non-Social Sciences subject areas.
Population and Settings	International students in higher education.	Non-higher education settings and/or non-international student populations.
Topical Focus	Cross-cultural transition/adjustment and institutional support mechanisms (e.g., orientation, advising, language support, counseling, mentoring, career services, practical/administrative support).	Studies that do not address institutional support (e.g., focusing only on individual traits without considering institutional factors).
Study type/ Evidence	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) and program evaluations	Conceptual/commentary pieces without a clearly described method
Availability	Full text accessible for screening and data extraction.	Full text not accessible.

Source: Researcher (2026)

Eligibility criteria were defined *a priori* and are summarised in **Table 1**.

Study Selection Process

Study selection was conducted in two stages: (1) Title-and-abstract screening for preliminary relevance against the eligibility criteria, followed by (2) full-text assessment to confirm final inclusion. The number of records at each stage (identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included) and the primary reasons for full-text exclusion were documented in a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. Where feasible, screening was performed independently by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus.

Data Extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized extraction form capturing author(s) and year, country/region, study aims, research design, participant characteristics, the type(s) of institutional support examined, reported outcomes (e.g., academic adaptation, social integration, psychological wellbeing, retention/achievement), and key findings and implications. To improve consistency and minimize extraction errors, the extraction form was piloted, and the extracted data were cross-checked prior to synthesis.

Data Synthesis and Thematic Analysis

Following data extraction, the included studies were synthesized using a narrative thematic analysis. First, the extracted findings were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the overall evidence base. Second, key findings related to forms of institutional support, transition challenges, and student adaptation outcomes were assigned initial codes. Third, codes with similar meanings were compared across studies and grouped into broader categories. Fourth, these categories were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring patterns and to generate overarching themes that captured the main areas of discussion in the literature. The resulting themes were then used to organize the Results and Discussion section, enabling the review to move beyond description toward an interpretive synthesis of convergent and divergent findings across the included studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the descriptive profiles of the included studies and synthesizes evidence on how institutional support shapes international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Rather than reiterating results, the discussion interprets patterns across studies, highlights convergent and divergent findings, and identifies actionable implications for higher education policy and practice.

Overview of The Included Studies

A synthesis of fourteen peer-reviewed journal articles (2020- April 2026; Scopus; Social Sciences) met the inclusion criteria (**Figure 1**). Although the evidence base is methodologically diverse, including survey-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), qualitative interviews, and focus groups, and program or curriculum descriptions, the

included studies converge on a single conclusion: individual resilience alone cannot sustain cross-cultural adaptation without institutional support that is accessible, culturally responsive, and integrated.

Table 2. Overview of the 14 Included Studies

Author(s), year	Title	Host country/setting	Design/sample	Key adaptation outcomes
Bethel <i>et al.</i> (2020)	The Cross-Cultural Transition and Psychological Adaptation of International Students: The Mediating Role of Host National Connectedness	New Zealand; tertiary institutions	Cross-sectional survey; N = 1,527 international tertiary students	Psychological adaptation (life satisfaction; psychological symptoms) via host-national connectedness
Jung (2023)	The Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Tertiary International Students in South Korea	South Korea; private tertiary institution	Qualitative (questionnaires + semi-structured interviews + focus group); 14 interview participants (plus survey respondents)	Adaptation is shaped by cultural affinity, host-language proficiency, and implicit discrimination.
Qiang & Saleh (2023)	Addressing Issues Related to International Students' Chinese Cultural Cognition, Learning Interest and Cross-Cultural Adaptation by Developing Chinese Traditional Music Module in Higher Vocational Colleges of China	China; higher vocational colleges	Program/module development (descriptive)	Cultural cognition and learning interest as pathways to improved cross-cultural adaptation
Hou & Abu (2024)	Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation among International Students in China: An Empirical Investigation	China; two universities (Shandong)	Survey; N = 167 international students	Adaptation is predicted by interaction, language proficiency, cultural distance, time in China, and satisfaction.
King <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Transformation and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Teacher Candidates in an International Student Teaching Program	Spain & Costa Rica; teacher education program	Mixed-methods case study; N = 18; pre/post CCAI + interviews	Cross-cultural adaptability gains; transformation via reflective intercultural experience

Author(s), year	Title	Host country/setting	Design/sample	Key adaptation outcomes
Chen & Billedo, (2025)	Crossing Digital Borders: Exploring the Role of Non-Chinese Social Media Use in the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese International Students	25 host countries; Chinese students abroad	Cross-sectional survey; N = 352	Non-Chinese social media engagement predicted psychological and sociocultural adaptation.
Tang <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Beyond Borders: The Effects of Perceived Cultural Distance, Cultural Intelligence, Cross-Cultural Adaptation on Academic Performance among International Students of Higher Education	China; higher education	Survey; moderated mediation SEM	Cultural distance reduced academic performance through adaptation; CQ buffered the negative effects.
Xin <i>et al.</i> (2025)	How Does Digital Connection Shape Cultural Adaptation? The Impact of Social Media Use on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in China	China; Guangxi universities	Survey; N = 713; SEM	Digital, physical, and psychological pathways to adaptation via activities and social integration
Liu <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Examining the Association Between Cultural Intelligence and Linguistic Confidence: The Mediating Roles of Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Interpersonal Communication Competence in International Students in China	China; international students	Survey; N = 244; SEM	CQ adaptation/communication competence L2 linguistic confidence
Zhang & Ting (2025)	Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Asian and Non-Asian International Students in China	China; four universities (western China)	Survey; N = 430	Adaptation trajectories differed by group and length of stay; phase-sensitive implications.
Wenyan <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Mediating Effect of Intrinsic Motivation Between Cross-Cultural Adaptation and International Students Academic Adaptation in China	China; multiple cities	Survey; N = 259; SEM	Intrinsic motivation mediated adaptation, academic adaptation relations

Author(s), year	Title	Host country/setting	Design/sample	Key adaptation outcomes
English & Chi (2020)	A Longitudinal Study on International Students Stress, Problem Focused Coping and Cross-Cultural Adaptation in China	China; international students	Two-wave longitudinal; N = 121	Coping moderated stress adaptation patterns across cultural groups
Fanari & Kim (2025)	Beyond Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Exploring International Students Communicative Resilience During Educational Sojourns in the United States	United States; university context	Focus groups; N = 41	Resilience practices via communication networks and reframing barriers
Zhu & Yang (2026)	Exploring the Role of Generative AI in International Students Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework Approach	International students; survey-based	Survey; N = 439	GenAI informational/emotional/social support predicted academic, psychological, and social adaptation.

Source: Scopus-Indexed Journal Articles (Processed by the Authors, 2026)

The characteristics of the included studies are summarised in **Table 2**.

Academic Support and Learning Adjustment

Academic adjustment in all of the studies was consistently framed as a student-preparedness challenge, not simply as a race for language proficiency (Bethel *et al.*, 2020; Hou & Abu, 2024; Jung, 2023). Extensive evidence suggests that culturally inclusive classroom climates and opportunities for positive contact with host nationals are associated with psychological adaptation and engagement, which, in turn, indirectly bolster students' academic performance (Bethel *et al.*, 2020). Within the China-specific evidence base, it was concluded that academic adaptation mediated students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation via motivational mechanisms: intrinsic motivation represented a prominent pathway through which adaptation was transformed and reflected in academic functioning (Wenyan *et al.*, 2023). Consistent with these results, research on perceived cultural distance suggests that cultural gaps can reduce academic performance unless they are buffered by higher cultural intelligence (Tang *et al.*, 2024). This finding suggests that culture-learning and competence-building elements should be part of academically oriented support rather than limited to remedial language provision.

Social Integration and Campus Belonging

One clear pattern across settings is that social integration serves as a mediating pathway between institutional contexts and adaptation outcomes (Bethel *et al.*, 2020; Fanari & Kim, 2025; Jung, 2023). Research in New Zealand and South Korea indicates that belonging and

connectedness are influenced by the institution's climate (i.e., cultural inclusiveness) as well as by practices that are sensitive to discrimination and prevent avoidance and exclusion. Most importantly, digital ecosystems function more than ever as a gateway (or barrier) to social inclusion. Social media use with host-country networks predicts psychological and sociocultural adaptation in China and in multi-country samples. It can also catalyze offline participation (e.g., extracurricular participation) to further strengthen a sense of social integration and, in turn, adaptation (Chen & Billedo, 2025; Xin *et al.*, 2025). Concurrently, phase-sensitive evidence indicates that students' needs change over time (English & Chi, 2020; Zhang & Ting, 2025). Therefore, institutions should frame integration support philosophically as staged (pre-arrival vs. first-semester administration vs. provision throughout students' ongoing studies), rather than a one-time orientation event.

Psychological Wellbeing and Counseling-Related Support

Responses indicated that psychological adaptation depended greatly on students' coping with uncertainty, stress, and identity challenges, as well as on their engagement with institutional structures (Bethel *et al.*, 2020). Longitudinal data suggest that the relationship between acculturation-related stress and coping is moderated by cultural background, such that problem-focused coping can ameliorate or exacerbate the effect of relational conflict on well-being among some groups but not others (English & Chi, 2020). Qualitative evidence also indicates that implicit discrimination and language differences can threaten psychological safety and deter involvement (Fanari & Kim, 2025; Jung, 2023).

Some recent work also indicates that technology-mediated supports are becoming important: Generative AI may serve as an additional layer of informational and emotional support, enhancing cultural learning, emotional regulation, and intercultural orientation, all of which predict academic, social, and psychological adjustment (Zhu & Yang, 2026). Collectively, the data corroborate a hybrid support model in which culturally tailored human services are supplemented by coordinated digitally assisted support under ethical regulatory oversight (Xin *et al.*, 2025; Zhu & Yang, 2026).

Practical and Administrative Support as an Adaptation Infrastructure

Clear administrative communication, procedural navigation, and access to institutional staff were practical supports that served as an infrastructure layer for successful adaptation, particularly in contexts where language barriers and institutional opacity restrict participation (Hou & Abu, 2024; Jung, 2023). Where the administrative processes felt remote, varied, and ambiguous, students reported spillovers into academic and social domains (Jung, 2023). On the other hand, research that measures institutional interfaces through interactions with teachers and administrators indicates an association between frequent, high-quality institutional contact and improved sociocultural adaptation (Hou & Abu, 2024). This trend highlights, then, that institutional support should be seen as a system in which practical services are not secondary to students' participation in their learning or campus life, but are fundamental enablers.

Digital and Technology-Enabled Support

In recent years, the role of digital ecosystems (social media platforms, messaging applications, and new generative AI tools) in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation has been highlighted (Chen & Billedo, 2025; Xin *et al.*, 2025; Zhu & Yang, 2026). While more process-oriented models suggest that digital engagement may catalyze offline participation and the relative contribution of both forms of participation to psychological integration (e.g., extracurricular involvement) suggests digital engagement towards general approaches that lower barriers for information seeking and attendance in online spaces, which can facilitate connection, sense making, and cultural learning (Chen & Billedo, 2025). Recent studies also explore the theoretical and managerial functions of Platform Servitization, whereby generative AI serves as a facilitative stimulus, providing informational, emotional, and social scaffolding that predicts academic, psychological, and social adaptation (Zhu & Yang, 2026). The major message of the report is for universities to consider digital support not as merely pastoral care, but as a continuum of student services governance that integrates curated knowledge, timely contacts, and ethical wisdom about the use of technology, rather than simply letting new modes of adaptation develop in informal online networks.

Cross-Cutting Issues: Accessibility, Cultural Responsiveness, and Equity

Three crosscutting issues appeared across themes. Accessibility was considered not only the availability of services but also clear communication, language, and timeliness of support (English & Chi, 2020; Jung, 2023; Zhang & Ting, 2025). Secondly, cultural responsiveness seemed critical: Procedures that viewed international students as homogeneous or treated adaptive effort as a remedial challenge were less likely to establish trust and commitment (Fanari & Kim, 2025; Jung, 2023). Third, under conditions of equity, factors such as differential access by language proficiency, cultural distance, and prior cross-cultural exposure highlighted that one-size-fits-all support models risked widening adaptation gaps (Hou & Abu, 2024; Tang *et al.*, 2024; Zhang & Ting, 2025).

Implications for Higher Education Policy and Practice

The evidence suggests that a coordinated, staged model of institutional support is more effective than a fragmented set of services. From a practical perspective, institutions should integrate academic, well-being, and administrative services through clear and accessible pathways, supported by culturally responsive advising (English & Chi, 2020; Jung, 2023). They should also invest in culturally inclusive learning environments and foster host-national connectedness as foundations for student wellbeing and engagement (Bethel *et al.*, 2020). In addition, institutions should develop curricular and co-curricular programs that embed cultural learning while sustaining student motivation (Qiang & Saleh, 2023; Wenyan *et al.*, 2023). Finally, universities should establish governance frameworks for digital support, including curated information hubs, structured opportunities to connect online engagement with offline participation, and guidance on the responsible use of generative AI tools (Chen & Billedo, 2025; Xin *et al.*, 2025; Zhu & Yang, 2026). Collectively, these measures can better support the multidimensional nature of adaptation and reduce students' reliance on informal coping mechanisms.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While there has been increased focus on international students' experiences, gaps remain in the literature. Empirically, cross-sectional designs, the gold standard by which to make causal claims, were rarely met, and phase-specific support needs were lost (Bethel *et al.*, 2020; Hou & Abu, 2024; Zhang & Ting, 2025). Modeling the dynamics of coping and stress over two waves, longitudinal evidence demonstrates that these differ across cultural groups, suggesting from a staged institutional support perspective that multi-site evaluations in longitudinal research are necessary (English & Chi, 2020). Conceptually, past adaptation research has generally failed to align indicators of service utilization with adaptation outcomes, limiting inference about what works for whom (Xin *et al.*, 2025; Zhu & Yang, 2026). Future research should conceptually take the following forms: moving from listing services to theorizing institutional support as a system beyond silos (i.e., controllable administrative infrastructures and collectives; digital ecologies); and using cultural responsiveness as a design feature that can be operationalized in monitored programs (Fanari & Kim, 2025; Jung, 2023; Zhu & Yang, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 14 Scopus-indexed Social Sciences journal articles (2020-2026) indicates that international students' cross-cultural adaptation is shaped by the interaction between individual capabilities (e.g., cultural intelligence, coping repertoires, intrinsic motivation, and communication competence) and institutional conditions that enable access, belonging, and culturally responsive engagement. Across settings, host-national connectedness and culturally inclusive learning environments emerge as pivotal determinants of psychological well-being and sustained academic engagement, while perceived cultural distance can undermine academic outcomes when not counterbalanced by competence-building resources. The synthesis also highlights that institutional support increasingly spans both offline and digital ecologies: social media can facilitate integration pathways, and emerging generative AI tools may provide informational and emotional scaffolding, pointing to the potential value of an integrated AI human support model. In practical terms, the evidence supports a staged, system-level approach that combines phase-sensitive preparation, academically embedded culture-learning and motivation-enhancing pedagogies, intentional initiatives that strengthen host-community ties and discrimination-sensitive climates, and governance for technology-mediated supports to reduce reliance on fragmented informal networks. Finally, the heterogeneity of designs and outcomes, and the predominance of cross-sectional evidence, limit causal inference; future research should prioritize longitudinal, multi-site evaluations with comparable outcome measures to inform scalable institutional models.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. The author also affirms that all data and content presented in the article are free of any plagiarism.

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