

Chinese Students on Mobility in Portuguese Higher Education Institutions: Sociocultural Adaptation in the Context of the Internationalisation of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students in Portuguese higher education institutions within the broader context of international academic mobility. As Portugal increasingly positions itself as a strategic destination for international students, particularly from China, understanding the dynamics of their integration becomes essential. Drawing on the Global Education Profiler and an adapted GAP-Matrix—both developed by the University of Warwick (2007)—the research quantitatively assesses the gap between students' expectations and their actual experiences across three key domains: daily life, academic engagement, and interpersonal interactions. Based on 355 survey responses, the findings reveal that while most students report successful adaptation, persistent challenges remain in academic performance, bureaucratic procedures, and intercultural communication. The study highlights the critical role of institutional support in promoting integration and proposes targeted strategies to enhance the internationalisation of Portuguese universities and improve the overall experience of Chinese students.

Keywords:

Academic mobility; Chinese international students; Intercultural communication; Portuguese higher education; Sociocultural adaptation.

Estudantes Chineses em Mobilidade no Ensino Superior Português: Adaptação Sociocultural no Contexto da Internacionalização do Ensino Superior

Resumo: Este estudo analisa a adaptação sociocultural de estudantes chineses em instituições de ensino superior portuguesas, no contexto mais amplo da mobilidade académica internacional. À medida que Portugal se afirma como um destino estratégico para estudantes internacionais, especialmente provenientes da China, torna-se essencial compreender as dinâmicas da sua integração. Com base no *Global Education Profiler* e numa versão adaptada da *GAP-Matrix* — ambos desenvolvidos pela Universidade de Warwick (2007) — a investigação avalia quantitativamente o desfasamento entre as expectativas dos estudantes e as suas experiências reais em três domínios fundamentais: vida quotidiana, envolvimento académico e interações interpessoais. A partir de 355 respostas ao inquérito, os resultados revelam que, embora a maioria dos estudantes manifeste uma adaptação bem-sucedida, persistem desafios ao nível do desempenho académico, dos procedimentos burocráticos e da comunicação intercultural. O estudo sublinha o papel crucial do apoio institucional na promoção da integração e propõe estratégias específicas para reforçar a internacionalização das universidades portuguesas e melhorar a experiência académica dos estudantes chineses.

Palavras-chave: Adaptação sociocultural; Comunicação intercultural; Ensino superior português; Estudantes internacionais chineses; Mobilidade académica.

Étudiants Chinois en Mobilité dans l'Enseignement Supérieur Portugais : Adaptation Socioculturelle dans le Contexte de l'Internationalisation de l'Enseignement Supérieur

Résumé: Cette étude examine l'adaptation socioculturelle des étudiants chinois dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur portugais, dans le cadre plus large de la mobilité académique internationale. Alors que le Portugal s'affirme de plus en plus comme une destination stratégique pour les étudiants internationaux, notamment en provenance de Chine, il devient essentiel de comprendre les dynamiques de leur intégration. En s'appuyant sur le *Global Education Profiler* et une version adaptée de la *GAP-Matrix* — tous deux développés par l'Université de Warwick (2007) — la recherche évalue quantitativement l'écart entre les attentes des étudiants et leurs expériences réelles dans trois domaines clés : la vie quotidienne, l'engagement académique et les interactions interpersonnelles. À partir de 355 réponses au questionnaire, les résultats révèlent que, bien que la majorité des étudiants fasse preuve d'une bonne adaptation, des défis persistants subsistent en matière de performance académique, de procédures bureaucratiques et de communication interculturelle. L'étude souligne le rôle crucial du soutien institutionnel dans la promotion de l'intégration et propose des stratégies ciblées pour renforcer l'internationalisation des universités portugaises et améliorer l'expérience globale des étudiants chinois.

Mots-clés : Adaptation socioculturelle; Communication interculturelle; Enseignement supérieur portugais; Étudiants internationaux chinois; Mobilité académique.

Estudiantes Chinos en Movilidad en la Enseñanza Superior Portuguesa: Adaptación Sociocultural en el Contexto de la Internacionalización de la Enseñanza Superior

Resumen: Este estudio analiza la adaptación sociocultural de los estudiantes chinos en instituciones de educación superior portuguesas, en el contexto más amplio de la movilidad académica internacional. A medida que Portugal se consolida como un destino estratégico para estudiantes internacionales, especialmente procedentes de China, resulta esencial comprender las dinámicas de su integración. Basándose en el *Global Education Profiler* y en una versión adaptada de la *GAP-Matrix* —ambos desarrollados por la Universidad de Warwick (2007)— la investigación evalúa cuantitativamente la brecha entre las expectativas de los estudiantes y sus experiencias reales en tres ámbitos clave: vida cotidiana, participación académica e interacciones personales. A partir de 355 respuestas a la encuesta, los resultados revelan que, aunque la mayoría de los estudiantes muestra una adaptación satisfactoria, persisten desafíos relacionados con el rendimiento académico, los procedimientos burocráticos y la comunicación intercultural. El estudio destaca el papel fundamental del apoyo institucional en la promoción de la integración y propone estrategias específicas para reforzar la internacionalización de las universidades portuguesas y mejorar la experiencia académica de los estudiantes chinos.

Palabras clave: Adaptación sociocultural; Comunicación intercultural; Enseñanza superior portuguesa; Estudiantes internacionales chinos; Movilidad académica.

1. Introduction

As reported by UNESCO and cited on the educationfair.net website¹, a record 1,021,303 Chinese students were studying abroad in 2023, with an additional 200,000 engaged in mobility and exchange programmes. This notable rise in academic mobility reflects China's New Economic and Scientific Development Strategy (Hu et al., 2018), which prioritises the international training of professionals. According to Andrade and Costa (2014), mobility is a central element of academic engagement and represents one of the most visible aspects of internationalisation in education. In Portugal, the internationalisation of higher education has become a strategic priority, making the country an increasingly appealing destination for Chinese students.

1.1 Contextualisation

Article 12, Chapter I of the Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China² promotes international cooperation in higher education. By the data collection date (May 2024), 32 of the 42 Chinese universities offering a major in Portuguese studies had sent students to Portuguese higher education institutions through academic mobility schemes. These programmes aim to enhance students' linguistic and intercultural abilities through immersion in a native-speaking environment. As Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019, p.1055) note, such experiences are "a valuable prerequisite for enhancing the quality of education and research and for fostering students' personal growth in intercultural competence and sensitivity." Grosso et al. (2021) also highlight the growing number of Chinese students benefiting from these immersive experiences, while Zhang (2019) and U (2020) stress their importance in developing intercultural competence.

However, the success of these initiatives depends on how well Chinese students adapt to life in Portugal. Dias (2015), in a study of Chinese students at a Portuguese university, identified several challenges—bureaucratic, academic, and cultural—that hinder full integration, with limited engagement with Portuguese society being a key issue.

In this context, our research investigates how Chinese students adapt during their studies in Portugal, considering the broader trend of higher education internationalisation. Drawing on the Global Education Profiler (GEP)³ and the adapted Gap Analysis Matrix (GAP-Matrix), both developed by the University of Warwick (2007), the study employs a quantitative approach to assess the gap between students' expectations and their lived

experiences, identifying key facilitators and barriers to sociocultural adaptation. As Castro (2011, cited in Zembrzuski *et al.*, 2021, p. 29) argues, “[...] in the globalised world, the exchange of students between countries on different continents needs to be studied and encouraged, because internationalising education promotes the improvement of educational quality in higher education institutions [...].”⁴ Therefore, it is essential to implement inclusive policies that support international students. Our study also evaluates whether Portuguese universities provide an environment conducive to the sociocultural integration of Chinese students, helping them overcome linguistic and intercultural challenges.

Against this background, the research addresses two main questions: (1) how Chinese students perceive the importance of sociocultural adaptation and the extent to which they experience related difficulties across key domains—namely daily life, academic life, and personal interaction; and (2) how Portuguese host institutions can better support these students based on the identified challenges and discrepancies between expectations and experiences.

1.2 A question of adaptation

Studying abroad presents various challenges that can lead to emotional and psychological strain (Kim, 2001). Fernandes (2018) notes that misunderstandings in interpersonal and communicative norms often cause anxiety in interactions with locals, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “culture shock”. Hall (1976) argues that intercultural exploration typically begins with a sense of disorientation, and that emotional discomfort is part of the growth process. Rather than shielding students from stress, it is essential to equip them with coping strategies to transform discomfort into motivation and adaptation.

Adaptation has gained increasing attention for its role in promoting intercultural development (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). Wilczewski and Alon (2023, p. 4) observe that terms such as “acculturation”, “adjustment”, and “integration” are often used interchangeably with “adaptation”. Kim (2001) defines adaptation as both a state and a process of responding to the host environment’s demands. Bennett (1986, 1993, apud Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019, p. 5) sees it as a precursor to intercultural sensitivity, leading to a broader identity that embraces cultural diversity.

Ward and Kennedy (1999) conceptualize cross-cultural adaptation as comprising two interrelated dimensions: psychological and sociocultural. Psychological adaptation

refers to international students' emotional and physical well-being during the adjustment process and may be influenced by factors such as separation from family, shared accommodation, and academic or personal challenges. Sociocultural adaptation, by contrast, concerns individuals' capacity to function effectively in the host environment, including managing daily life, meeting academic demands, and engaging with host nationals. Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) argue that sociocultural adaptation is best understood within a social skills or cultural learning framework and, following Black and Stephens (1989), identify three domains: general adjustment (daily-life management), interaction adjustment (effective relations with host nationals), and work adjustment (achievement of task-related goals). In the context of international student mobility, academic adjustment constitutes a central domain, effectively replacing work adjustment. More broadly, Kim (2001) conceptualizes successful adaptation as a dynamic process involving functional competence, psychological well-being, and the development of cultural identity.

Messelink et al. (2015) highlight the importance of real intercultural contact and institutional support in promoting integration. Beaven and Spencer-Oatey (2016) illustrate this through a case study of an Erasmus student's adaptation journey. Research on Chinese students abroad has largely focused on academic aspects, such as classroom participation (Liu, 2002), learning styles (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011), and academic performance (Crawford & Wang, 2015). However, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) found that Chinese students often struggle with social interaction, which correlates with psychological stress.

With regard to Chinese students in Portugal, previous studies point to both the benefits of academic mobility and the persistence of adaptation challenges. Fernandes (2018) and Grosso *et al.* (2021) highlight the substantial growth in the number of Chinese students participating in mobility programmes in Portuguese-speaking countries, noting positive outcomes in terms of language development and cultural immersion. Building on this, Zhang (2019) and U (2020) emphasise that study and exchange experiences in Lusophone contexts play a significant role in enhancing Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence. Despite these advantages, empirical research also reveals notable difficulties. Dias (2015), in a study conducted at a Portuguese university, identifies a range of challenges faced by Chinese students, including administrative procedures, academic adjustment and cultural differences, and concludes that full integration into the host society is often not achieved, largely due to a degree of

disconnection from Portuguese social life. More recently, Pires (2022) argues that, as academic exchanges between China and Portugal continue to deepen and student numbers rise, issues related to intercultural communication have become increasingly prominent. Overall, the literature suggests that, while mobility experiences bring clear linguistic and intercultural benefits, they also require more structured support to address ongoing challenges of adaptation and social integration.

This study focuses on the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students in Portugal, applying Ward and Kennedy's (1999) framework. It aims to assess how well these students adjust to studying and living in Portugal within the broader context of higher education internationalisation.

1.3 Global Education Profiler

The internationalisation metrics used by the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, the *QS World University Rankings*, and *U-Multirank* – a multidimensional rankings initiative supported by the European Commission – rely predominantly on structural and quantitative indicators. These metrics prioritise variables such as the absolute number and proportion of international students and academic staff, as well as levels of inbound and outbound mobility. Although such indicators offer a comparative snapshot of institutional diversity, they measure only the numerical presence of difference and fail to capture its pedagogical or developmental impact. As Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2018) contend, this form of diversity constitutes no more than a necessary precondition for the development of intercultural skills and personal qualities in multicultural environments. It therefore corresponds to what they define as *compositional internationalisation*—an initial and inherently limited stage in the internationalisation process.

Universities must therefore move decisively beyond compositional internationalisation towards *community internationalisation*. This shift requires the intentional design of institutional environments in which individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds actively interact, exchange perspectives, and collaborate in meaningful ways. The goal is no longer numerical diversity alone, but the formation of a genuinely international academic community in which both staff and students systematically develop intercultural competences. This more advanced, process-

and outcome-oriented stage of internationalisation is conceptualised as *competency internationalisation*.

It is within this conceptual framework that the Global Education Profiler (GEP) was developed. Grounded in the concept of *Global People*, the GEP was designed in 2007 by a research team at the University of Warwick as a diagnostic instrument for systematically identifying and evaluating the nature of the global education environment experienced by both students and staff. The framework comprises two complementary versions: one designed for students and another targeting academic and administrative staff.

The student version of the GEP enables a structured and evidence-based assessment of institutional internationalisation across five core dimensions: social integration, academic integration, communication skills, foreign language skills, and institutional support for global graduate skills. Each dimension is operationalised through multiple items assessed in relation to both their perceived importance and students' lived experiences. This dual-assessment approach addresses three critical and ongoing questions for internationalised higher education institutions: (1) what students value most, (2) the extent to which institutions meet these priorities in practice, and (3) where measurable gaps persist between expectations and lived experience.

Within this framework, adaptation is conceptualised through a rigorously student-centred lens. Rather than being treated merely as an individual process of psychological or sociocultural adjustment, adaptation is reframed as a direct and measurable indicator of the quality of the educational environment and, by extension, of an institution's level of internationalisation. This evaluation is operationalised through the Gap Analysis Matrix (GAP-Matrix), a core analytical component of the GEP, which systematically identifies and quantifies discrepancies between what students consider important and what they actually experience in institutional practice.

2. Methodology

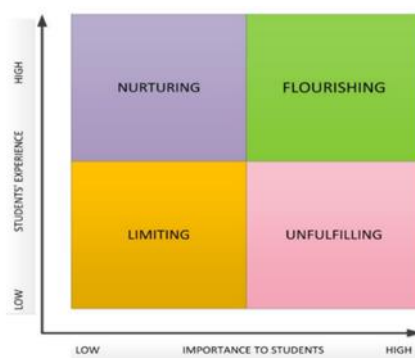
2.1 Gap Analysis Matrix (GAP-Matrix)

The Gap Analysis Matrix (GAP-Matrix), part of the Global Education Profiler (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2018), compares students' perceived importance (IMP) with

their actual experience (EXP) across key domains. High IMP scores reflect strong motivation and value placed on internationalisation, while high EXP scores indicate enriching educational experiences.

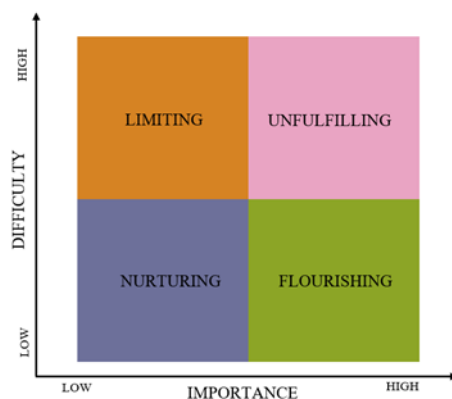
Combining IMP and EXP produces four distinct contexts: “Flourishing” (high IMP/high EXP), “Unfulfilling” (high IMP/low EXP), “Nurturing” (low IMP/high EXP), and “Limiting” (low IMP/low EXP), as illustrated in Figure 1. Among these, the “Flourishing” quadrant most accurately represents successful community internationalisation.

Figure 1. GAP-Matrix (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2018)



This study modifies the GAP-Matrix by substituting EXP with difficulty (DIF), based on the assumption that lower difficulty corresponds to higher experience. The horizontal axis remains IMP, while the vertical axis now represents DIF. The adapted GAP-Matrix is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. GAP-Matrix adapted for this study



Using this modified matrix, the study analyses the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students in Portuguese universities, identifying gaps between their expectations

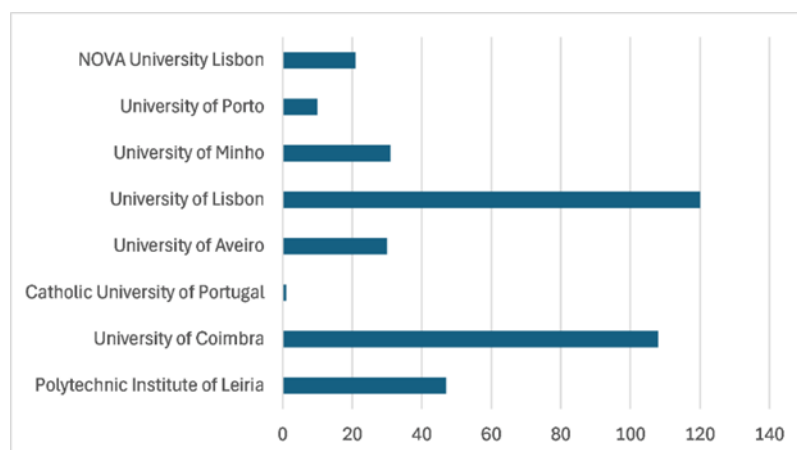
and lived experiences. This diagnostic approach offers insights into the internationalisation quality of host institutions from a student-centred perspective.

2.2 Questionnaire

To achieve this goal, a questionnaire survey was conducted between April and May 2024. The target population included both Chinese students who were studying in Portugal at the time of data collection and those who had studied at Portuguese higher education institutions within the previous ten years. The questionnaire was administered in two formats: in Portuguese-language classrooms, where participants completed it within approximately thirty minutes, and online via the TENGXUN Wenjuan platform. The survey was distributed to Chinese students who were currently enrolled in, or had previously completed, degree programmes related to Portuguese as a foreign language in China, including Mainland China and the Macau Special Administrative Region.

A total of 369 questionnaires were collected. After excluding 14 invalid responses, 355⁵ valid questionnaires were retained for the present analysis. Respondents who provided valid responses were current or former students from 32 Chinese universities, including 27 institutions in Mainland China and 5 in Macau. These 355 informants were currently participating in, or had previously participated in, study programmes at eight Portuguese higher education institutions: NOVA University of Lisbon (21), University of Porto (10), University of Minho (31), University of Lisbon (120), University of Aveiro (30), Catholic University of Portugal (1), University of Coimbra (108), and the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (47). The distribution of student informants across Portuguese institutions is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Distribution of student informants by Portuguese institution



The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. The first part outlined the purpose of the study and assured participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. It also collected background information, including the academic years during which respondents had attended or were currently attending an annual Portuguese language and culture programme, the Portuguese higher education institutions where these programme were undertaken, and the Chinese universities where respondents had completed or were completing their degree programmes.

The second part focused on students' experiences in three domains: daily life, academic life, and personal interactions. These domains comprised 10, 15 and 13 items respectively, the full details of which are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4. All items were measured using five-point Likert scales and were designed to address two key issues relevant to internationalised higher education institutions: aspects perceived by students as important (IMP) and those perceived as difficult (DIF).

To minimise potential declines in attention, the questionnaire was designed with clear wording, a logical item sequence, and content closely aligned with students' study experiences. Although respondent fatigue cannot be entirely excluded, the high proportion of valid responses suggests that adequate engagement was maintained, supporting the reliability and validity of the data.

The questionnaire was adapted from the model developed by Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2012) for the study of international students' sociocultural adaptation in UK universities. Prior to full administration, the instrument was piloted with a sample of ten informants. Feedback from the pilot study informed several revisions to ensure better alignment with the current context and experiences of Chinese students in Portugal.

Key modifications included the following. In the daily life domain, items related to living standards, medical needs, and administrative tasks (such as residence permits and tax identification numbers) were added. In the academic life domain, questions concerning computer use and library access were replaced with items addressing academic achievement and access to required reading materials. In the personal interaction domain, questions were updated to reflect contemporary modes of communication and living arrangements, including social media use, shared spaces, and relationships with landlords and roommates, while outdated or culturally irrelevant items were removed.

Following these revisions, the questionnaire was employed to achieve three main objectives: (1) to assess the importance (IMP) attributed by students to different aspects

of sociocultural adaptation; (2) to examine the extent to which Chinese students experienced difficulties (DIF) related to sociocultural adaptation; and (3) to identify which domains – daily life, academic life, and personal interactions – and which specific issues were perceived as more or less important and more or less difficult.

The data were analysed using the adapted GAP-Matrix model. Scores for each item were mapped onto four quadrants - nurturing, unfulfilling, limiting, and flourishing - to identify strengths and weaknesses in students' adaptation experiences. This approach made it possible to highlight existing challenges in Chinese students' daily, academic, and interpersonal adjustment in Portugal and to assess the degree of community internationalisation from the students' perspective.

3. Presentation of results

The results show that the internal consistency of the three domains was satisfactory.

Table 1. Internal consistency of the three domains - *Cronbach's Alpha*

	Cronbach's Alpha
Difficulty	
Daily life	0.81
Academic life	0.93
Personal interaction	0.88
Difficulty	
Daily life	0.80
Academic life	0.95
Personal interaction	0.90

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the domains were measured with a high level of reliability⁶.

- Daily life

According to the data in Table 2, the students considered all factors in the field of daily life to be important for those living in a foreign environment. Particularly notable were aspects related to climate, food, transport, accommodation, lifestyle, prices, and managing everyday affairs. The need for medical assistance, dealing with the residence

card, telephone card, multibank card, and tax identification number (among others), and adapting to local accommodation were identified as the most relevant areas, with scores of 4.28, 4.23 and 4.25 for questions D9, D10 and D4, respectively. These are three contexts in which students have to interact with others.

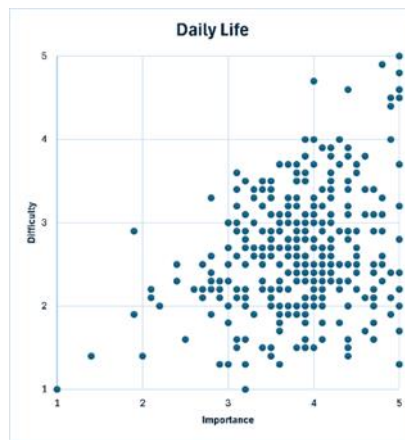
Table 2. Scores for the domain of daily life

Difficulty	Daily life	Importance
2.03	D1. Getting used to the local climate	3.25
2.70	D2. Getting used to the local food	3.61
2.03	D3. Buying daily necessities	3.95
2.81	D4. Adapting to the local accommodation (e.g. use of kitchen or sharing a house with others)	4.15
2.48	D5. Travelling around by public transport	3.76
2.26	D6. Getting used to the local habits and pace of life	3.80
2.62	D7. Getting used to local living standards (e.g. rents, transport costs, meal costs, etc.)	3.90
2.80	D8. Doing your favorite leisure activities	3.48
3.50	D9. Dealing with health problems or physical discomfort (e.g. going to the pharmacy, hospital or clinic)	4.28
3.50	D10. Obtaining a residence card, a phone card, a multibank card, a tax identification number, etc.	4.23

1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

On the other hand, the students did not report major problems in aspects they could resolve on their own, such as adapting to food, shopping, the local pace of life, and transportation. However, they faced more challenges in contexts requiring personal interaction, such as going to the pharmacy, hospital, or clinic; obtaining a residence card, phone card, multibank card, and tax identification number; or using the kitchen and sharing a house with others. Interestingly, the three highest scores correspond to the same three contexts considered most important, with values of 3.50, 3.50 and 2.81 for questions D9, D10 and D4, respectively.

Figure 4. Distribution of scores per individual in the domain of daily life



According to the adapted GAP-Matrix, Figure 4 shows that, in the realm of daily life, students are mainly located in the flourishing quadrant and on the periphery of the unfulfilling quadrant, which borders the first quadrant.

Thus, students are generally satisfied with their daily life in Portugal, indicating that the scores on the IMP mostly correspond to those on the DIF. However, as illustrated in Figure 4, there are still several answers in the unfulfilling quadrant, showing that many students have faced problems in their daily lives.

- Academic life

In the area of academic life, the students gave relatively high scores to all the questions, demonstrating a very positive attitude towards their studies. The greatest importance was attributed to academic performance and aspects related to the classroom, with the highest scores for questions A4, A15, and A3, which were 4.50, 4.32, and 4.30 respectively.

Table 3. Scores for the domain of academic life

Difficulty	Academic life	Importance
2.41	A1. Asking teachers for help when you have problems with your studies	4.29
2.72	A2. Participating in the discussions in class	4.18
3.00	A3. Expressing your ideas in class clearly	4.30
3.12	A4. Understanding lectures	4.50
2.69	A5. Taking notes of key points of lecture in class	4.23

3.02	A6. Reading and understanding materials recommended by your teachers	4.28
3.80	A7. Writing up papers that can earn you good grades	4.15
2.39	A8. Understanding teachers' comments on your coursework or papers	3.99
2.56	A9. Getting used to the teaching methods	4.21
2.66	A10. Obtaining the reading materials you need	3.90
1.94	A11. Completing coursework on time	4.21
2.87	A12. Getting used to being grouped with students of different nationalities	3.92
3.00	A13. Talking about study issues with students of other nationalities after class	3.71
2.36	A14. Understanding the assessment scheme of the university	4.03
3.30	A15. Achieving satisfactory academic results	4.32

1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

In terms of difficulty, the students experienced the greatest challenges in getting good grades and understanding their teachers. The biggest problems were identified in questions A7, A5, and A4, with scores of 3.80, 3.30, and 3.12 respectively. In general, the students' DIF in studying was shown to be at a reasonable level, which contrasts with the high value they place on studying (IMP). The lowest score of all the questions, 1.94, was given to question A11, "Completing coursework on time". This indicates that the students are disciplined and maintain a positive attitude towards studying.

Figure 5. Distribution of scores per individual in the domain of academic life

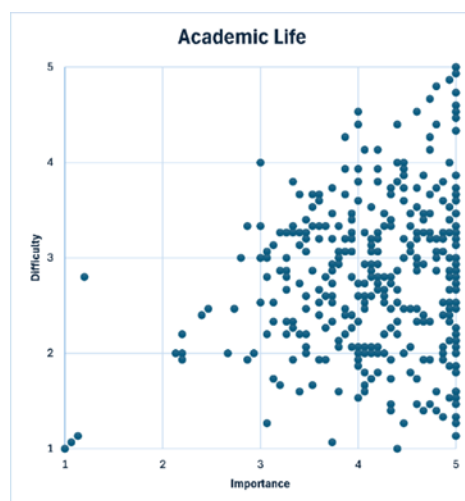


Figure 5 shows that students are positioned in the flourishing and unfulfilling quadrants in the domain of academic life. Although they similarly value the importance of their studies at Portuguese higher education institutions, there is significant variation in their experiences. Future research grounded in a qualitative methodology can identify the factors contributing to this discrepancy in the study experience among students with similar profiles and goals. The qualitative approach could also define if the problems are related to teaching methods, interactions with teachers and classmates, the organisation of classes and programmes, teaching materials, or other factors.

- Personal interactions

As for personal interactions, the students generally approached this question with a positive attitude. The greatest importance is attributed to question P13, “Maintaining a harmonious relationship with the landlord and roommates”, which returned a score of 4.11. The next most valued questions are P6, “Contacting your families or friends through social medias/phone/email, etc.”, and P5, “Getting used to living independently from your parents”. The answers show that the students particularly valued interaction with the people they lived with.

Table 4. Scores for the domain of personal interactions

Difficulty	Personal interactions	Importance
1.72	P1. Making friends with Chinese people	3.25
3.44	P2. Making friends with Portuguese people	3.71
3.07	P3. Making friends with people of other nationalities (besides Portuguese)	3.38
2.77	P4. Taking part in local social events (e.g. coffees and holiday celebrations)	3.30
2.17	P5. Getting used to living independently from your parents	3.93
1.54	P6. Contacting your families or friends through social medias/phone/email, etc.	4.10
2.96	P7. Dealing with other nationalities who annoy you (e.g. those littering the common areas, or making noise in the library)	3.31
2.62	P8. Dealing with the university's administrative staff	3.61
2.80	P9. Being introduced to new people of other nationalities	3.01
3.01	P10. Starting a conversation with people of other nationalities and keeping it going	3.48

3.91	P11. Understanding jokes and humour in Portuguese	3.32
2.42	P12. Dealing with physical closeness and touching in social settings (e.g. kissing and hugging)	3.26
2.63	P13. Maintaining a harmonious relationship with your landlord and roommates	4.11

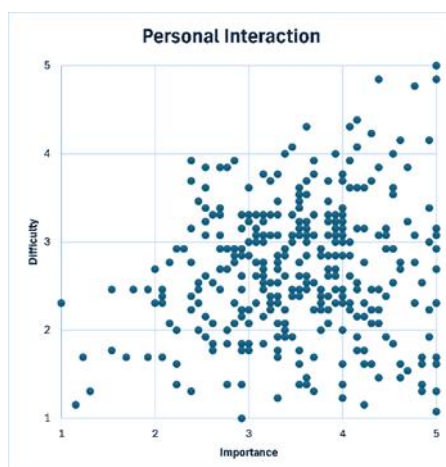
1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

However, students found it more difficult to understand jokes and humour in Portuguese (P11, with a score of 3.91), which indicates the need to develop their linguistic and intercultural skills. In addition, making friends with Portuguese people (P2, with a score of 3.44) and people of other nationalities (P3, with a score of 3.07) are other areas in which students encounter difficulties. This suggests that the Chinese students had difficulties in interacting or communicating effectively with locals and people of other nationalities living in Portugal.

Other difficulties pointed out by the students included attending local social events, dealing with foreigners who bothered them, interacting with the university's administrative staff, physical contact at social events, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with their landlord and roommates.

The smallest difficulty was identified in question P6, "Contacting your families or friends through social medias/phone/email, etc.", which returned a score of 1.54. Technological advances have made it easier for students to communicate and, to a certain extent, have helped them deal with the anxiety, stress and uncertainty associated with living in a foreign country.

Figure 6. Distribution of scores by individual in the domain of personal interactions



The data presented in Figure 6 indicates that students are mainly distributed across three quadrants: flourishing, unfulfilling, and nurturing, with a few in the limiting quadrant. Some students who had high scores on the IMP and low scores on the DIF are satisfied with their interactions with family, friends, and others around them; others who had high scores on both the IMP and DIF faced difficulties due to deviations from their expectations and desires; and still others, who showed little interest, faced fewer difficulties in personal interactions. The presence of students in the last group is not ideal for a university, because, although these students are satisfied, they have not shown a strong desire to participate in the internationalization and diversity of the university campus.

- Three domains

Table 5 lists the ten most important questions categorized into the three domains. Eight of these questions belong to the domain of academic life (A4, A15, A3, A1, A6, A5, A9, and A11), while two are part of the domain of daily life (D9 and D10). No questions from the personal interaction domain are included.

Table 5. Ten questions from the three domains ranked as most important

Ranking	Questions	Score
1	A4. Understanding lectures	4.50
2	A15. Achieving satisfactory academic results	4.32
3	A3. Expressing your ideas in class clearly	4.30
4	A1. Asking teachers for help when you have problems with your studies	4.29
5, 6,	D9. Dealing with health problems or physical discomfort (e.g. going to the pharmacy, hospital or clinic)	4.28
	A6. Reading and understanding materials recommended by your teachers	4.28
7,8,	D10. Obtaining a residence card, a phone card, a multibank card, a tax identification number, etc.	4.23
	A5. Taking notes of key points of lecture in class	4.23
9,10,	A9. Getting used to the teaching methods	4.21
	A11. Completing coursework on time	4.21

1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

According to Table 6, question P11 – “Understanding jokes and humour in Portuguese” - stands out as it requires an in-depth knowledge of Portuguese culture and relates to the development of students’ intercultural skills. Of the ten questions rated as most difficult, four belong to the domain of personal interactions. In addition to P11, questions P2, P3, and P10 involve social relationships with Portuguese people and other foreigners. In the domain of academic life, the most difficult questions (A7, A15, A4, and A6) indicate a need to improve competences in written comprehension and writing production, as well as competence in oral comprehension, to achieve good academic performance. In the area of daily life, questions D9 and D10 reinforce one of the conclusions of Cui’s study (2018), which identified the inefficiency of public services and long waiting times in hospitals as significant problems.

Table 6. Ten questions from the three domains rated as most difficult

Ranking	Questions	Score
1	P11. Understanding jokes and humour in Portuguese	3.91
2	A7. Writing up papers that can earn you good grades	3.80
3, 4,	D9. Dealing with health problems or physical discomfort (e.g. going to the pharmacy, hospital or clinic)	3.50
	D10. Obtaining a residence card, a phone card, a bank card, a tax identification number, etc.	3.50
5	P2. Making friends with Portuguese people	3.44
6	A15. Achieving satisfactory academic results	3.30
7	A4. Understanding lectures	3.12
8	P3. Making friends with people of other nationalities (besides Portuguese)	3.07
9	A6. Reading and understanding materials recommended by your teachers	3.02
10	P10. Starting a conversation with people of other nationalities and keeping it going	3.01

1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

Students face various challenges in interpersonal relationships for a variety of reasons. The results of this study suggest that students' lack of attention and interest may be a relevant factor.

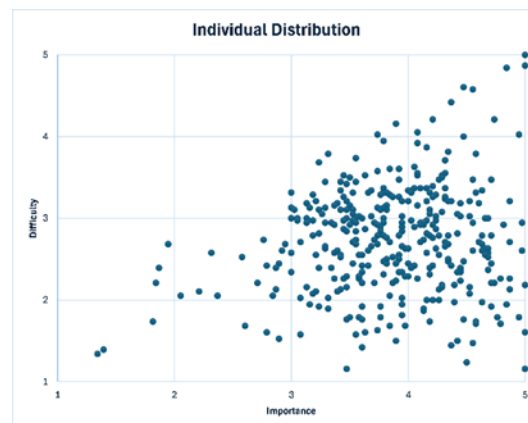
Table 7. Mean scores and standard deviations for the three domains
sociocultural adaptation

	Average	Standard deviation
Difficulty in sociocultural adaptation		
Daily life	2.67	1.27
Academic life	2.79	1.21
Personal interaction	2.70	1.32
Importance of sociocultural adaptation		
Daily life	3.84	1.12
Academic life	4.15	0.99
Personal interaction	3.52	1.24

1 - without difficulty/importance; 5 - with extreme difficulty/importance

Table 7 shows the average scores for the six subscales. The students attributed importance to all three domains, highlighting academic adaptation as particularly relevant and personal interaction as less significant. In terms of difficulty, academic life and personal interactions were considered more challenging, while daily life was seen as less difficult. These results are consistent with the data presented in Tables 2–6 and Figures 4–6.

Figure 7. Distribution of scores per individual in the three domains



Overall, the analysis of the data illustrated in Figure 7 reveals that the majority of Chinese students are positioned in the flourishing quadrant. This indicates significant satisfaction with their adaptation to life and study in Portugal, suggesting that most of their expectations concerning daily life, academic life and personal interaction have been realised. This result reflects the positive environment and conditions provided by Portuguese higher education institutions, which have facilitated the successful adaptation of Chinese students into a country vastly different in terms of society, politics, living standards, and customs from their own. However, a considerable proportion of students were found in the unfulfilling quadrant, being characterized by relatively high scores on the IMP and DIF associated with sociocultural adaptation. Despite this, the scores of this group are relatively close to the flourishing quadrant, indicating moderate adaptation difficulties for many Chinese students.

In summary, most students are situated in the flourishing quadrant and the unfulfilling quadrant. Additionally, a portion of scores fell into the nurturing quadrant, which was characterized by low scores on both the IMP and the DIF, indicating that some students either do not value or find sociocultural adaptation challenging.

4. Discussion

Student mobility is a vital indicator of the internationalisation of higher education, engaging both local and international students, as well as academic and administrative staff (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). The Global People framework developed by the University of Warwick (2007) highlights social and academic integration as key dimensions for evaluating global learning environments. This study explored the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students enrolled in Portuguese-language programmes at Chinese universities who have participated or are currently participating in mobility programmes in Portugal. Findings reveal that while students were highly motivated to adapt, they encountered significant challenges in accessing essential services such as residence permits, phone and multibank cards, tax identification numbers, and healthcare. These challenges were mostly related to administrative procedures and were always conditioned by interactions with the local community outside the academic campus. It should be noted, however, that university institutions provide information to support and guide international students in contacting external entities, such as Agência

para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo (AIMA), to obtain all the necessary documents for their stay in the country as students. Nevertheless, delays in the visa application process before arriving in Portugal, as well as delays in service at AIMA offices, can be seen as factors that hinder the entire socio-cultural adaptation process in Portugal. Despite successfully adjusting to climate, accommodation, transport, and general living conditions, difficulties, such as those mentioned above with bureaucratic and medical systems, persisted. Most students were positioned in the flourishing quadrant, though some experienced unfulfilling outcomes. Stability in daily life is essential for academic focus, as unresolved practical issues can hinder learning. It is therefore recommended that Portuguese universities implement targeted support measures to assist Chinese students in navigating these everyday challenges.

Academic life was highly valued by Chinese students, underscoring the success of the mobility programme. Key aspects such as interaction with teachers and peers, classroom participation, teaching methods, and academic performance were considered essential. Although Li (2005) suggests that learning beliefs are resistant to change, the students in this study showed a strong willingness to adapt to Portuguese academic practices, confirming Pires' (2022) findings on their openness to alternative teaching and assessment methods. This adaptability is vital for their professional development and the cultivation of global competencies.

Nonetheless, students faced notable challenges in academic writing (A7), lecture comprehension (A4), and achieving satisfactory results (A15). These difficulties placed them in both flourishing and unfulfilling quadrants, indicating that while some benefited from the programme, others struggled despite their motivation. A gap between expectations and reality was evident. Portuguese universities should implement targeted strategies to support Chinese students, addressing curriculum design, teaching materials, and pedagogical approaches. Among these strategies are mentoring programmes involving post-graduate Chinese students, in the MA and PhD in Portuguese as a Foreign Language, organisation of cultural and daily life activities outside of the campus to promote social interaction with the locals and to bring to the classroom these experiences, as a complement to the teaching and learning materials and pedagogical approaches.

Linguistic competence emerged as a key factor in adaptation. As Byram (1997) argues, mastering a standard language is central to intercultural competence. Wu (2013) identified a positive correlation between communication competence and English language proficiency. In contrast, U (2020) underscored the significance of enhancing

Portuguese language education as a means of fostering intercultural development among Chinese students in Macau.

In the realm of personal interactions, Chinese students considered all aspects important, yet struggled most with culturally nuanced expressions in Portuguese. The sociocultural dimension, often underestimated, led to communication failures due to difficulties in interpreting symbolic meanings. The CEFR-CV (Council of Europe, 2018) outlines linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competences as essential for effective communication. The gap identified in this study may explain challenges in learning Portuguese and in oral and written exchanges (Grosso & Zhang, 2018), underscoring the need to foster intercultural competence.

Students also faced difficulties in forming friendships with Portuguese and other international peers, attending social events, initiating conversations, and interacting with administrative staff and landlords. These challenges affected their well-being and academic performance. Students were distributed across flourishing, unfulfilling, and nurturing quadrants, with some lacking motivation to engage socially. Dia (2015) observed that Chinese students often socialise only with compatriots, while Zembrzuski et al. (2021) highlighted the role of friendship and support networks in successful adaptation. These findings stress the importance of inclusive university programmes that promote social integration and intercultural interaction.

To support Chinese students in their sociocultural adaptation, Portuguese host institutions should actively promote interaction between mobility students and the local community, for example, through cooperation in University library activities or in the academic bureau, and by participating in outreach activities promoted by the Confucius Institute for the local community, engage in tandem programmes with Portuguese colleagues. Such initiatives help Chinese students become familiar with local customs, integrate socially, and enhance both linguistic and intercultural competences.

As shown in Figure 7, most Chinese students rated social adaptation as important or very important. High scores on the IMP reflect their strong aspiration for a global educational experience, essential for personal and academic growth. These findings align with Cunha (2014, p. 116), who observed that young Chinese students value cultural exchange, both within multicultural classrooms and through contact with Portuguese peers.

However, students' experiences varied. While some belonged to the flourishing quadrant and could reflect on their experiences to build global competences, others in the

unfulfilling quadrant faced barriers to integration. For these students, identifying and addressing such obstacles is crucial. Additionally, students in the nurturing quadrant, with low IMP and DIF scores, require encouragement to recognise the benefits of their international experience.

This study highlights the diversity among Chinese students, challenging generalisations and stereotypes such as that they are very quiet and introverted, and that they don't like to interact with other cultures, they prefer to interact with other Chinese people, and they all look and speak the same way. As Cortazzi and Lixian (2011) state, "those who make generalizations need to avoid reduction and oversimplification through labelling as 'Chinese' or a false sense of sameness and homogeneity" (p. 314). In addition to self-identification with the Chinese language and culture, it is crucial to recognize individual and group differences, as well as the geographical, economic, social, and cultural diversity that characterizes Chinese students. This profile of students is "[...] changing in line with the social, cultural and technological changes in the education systems of Macau and Mainland China, [...] a new generation of Chinese mother tongue speakers, trained in international contexts [...]"⁷ (Grosso et al., 2021, p. 156).

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students engaged in academic mobility programmes at Portuguese higher education institutions, within the broader framework of internationalisation in higher education. The self-assessment data highlight significant challenges in domains such as interpersonal interaction and academic engagement, suggesting a disparity between students' expectations and their lived experiences. Future research on this topic can be done with a more comprehensive analysis in each domain. Other, more robust statistical tools can also be applied to the data to confirm the study's findings. The same research instruments can be applied to other students in the future to study the evolution of students' profiles and intercultural competences, as well as to identify changes in academic institutions regarding academic mobility.

It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform and inspire Portuguese universities hosting Chinese students, enabling institutional leaders, academic staff, and administrative personnel to enhance their support structures and foster a genuinely

international learning environment—one in which Chinese students can integrate effectively and thrive.

Notes

1. Available at <https://www.educationfair.net/market-reports/asia/china/>, accessed on 10 July 2025.
2. Available at http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_zcfg/zcfg_jyfl/202204/t20220421_620257.html, accessed on 7 August 2025.
3. Available at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople2/he_institutions/gep/, accessed on 10 May 2025.
4. Translation of “[...] no mundo globalizado, o intercâmbio de estudantes entre os países de diferentes continentes necessita ser estudado e estimulado, pois ao internacionalizar o ensino promove-se a melhoria da qualidade educacional nas instituições de Ensino Superior, [...]”
5. 13 of the 355 informants have carried out an exchange programme at two Portuguese higher education institutions.
6. Cronbach's alpha measures the internal consistency or reliability of a set of survey questions or scale items. It indicates how closely related a set of items are as a group in measuring a single concept, with values ranging from 0 to 1. The scale is usually interpreted as the follow: ≥ 0.90 (Excellent): High reliability, but may indicate item redundancy (questions are too similar); 0.80 - 0.89 (Good): Highly reliable; 0.70 - 0.79 (Acceptable): Generally considered an acceptable threshold for most social science or survey research; 0.60 - 0.69 (Questionable): Reliability is low; the scale may need revision. <0.60 (Poor): Unacceptable; items do not form a reliable scale.
7. Translation of “[...] em transformação, acompanhando as mudanças sociais, culturais e tecnológicas dos sistemas de ensino de Macau e da China Interior, [...] uma nova geração de falantes de língua materna chinesa, com a formação obtida em contextos internacionais [...]”.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)

We declare that GenAI tools were not used. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their manuscripts.

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Data de submissão: novembro, 2025

Data de avaliação: janeiro-agosto, 2026

Data de publicação: setembro, 2026