Exploring the academic adjustment of Pakistani students in second-tier Chinese cities

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani students have become the third largest group of international students in China, and the largest group in many Chinese second-tier cities. This study explores their academic adjustment difficulties in Jiangxi, China by employing a mixed-methods approach, involving 134 questionnaires and 9 interviews. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and Smart-PLS. Based on the study, it was found that Pakistani students encountered minor challenges in academic adjustment, and they relied on teachers, family, and friends for significant social support. However, there are concerns regarding the compromised quality of teaching due to deliberately lowered academic standards. To enhance the education quality and academic performance of Pakistani students and other international students studying in second-tier cities in China, this study suggests raising the academic standards to ensure their educational progress, improving teacher-student relations, establishing a supportive peer network, enhancing academic resources, and offering increased opportunities for cultural exchange.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to understanding the relationships among internal factors of academic adjustment of Pakistani students in Chinese second-tier cities. It reveals previously undisclosed issues in managing and educating international students in the universities of those cities.

1. INTRODUCTION

China has become the third-largest destination for international students globally and the largest destination for international students in Asia after the policy of Belt and Road Initiative was issued in 2015 (Mao, Wang, & Ji, 2023; Tian, Lu, Yin, & Li, 2020). The total number of international students in China has increased 2.06 times from 2009 to 2018 (MOE China, 2018). Students at Chinese higher education institutions are increasingly diverse, which calls for a better understanding of international students' academic, sociocultural, and personal needs (Hussain & Shen, 2019). Therefore, some scholars have conducted research on their cross-cultural adjustment. However, these studies are generally conducted in developed cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and little attention has been paid to those in second-tier cities in China. Moreover, the combination of affordable education fees, scholarship opportunities by provincial government, cultural affinity, and career prospects make Chinese second-tier cities an attractive destination for many Pakistani students seeking higher education. It is worth noting that Pakistani students constitute the third-largest group of international students in China, slightly fewer than those from Korea and Thailand, and have made up the largest group of international students in many Chinese second-tier cities

(MOE China, 2018). However, there is a scarcity of research on them, as most studies on cross-cultural adjustment have been conducted in developed cities. This study serves a critical purpose in bridging the gap in knowledge about the academic adjustment of this often-overlooked group in second-tier cities in China. By delving into the academic challenges faced by Pakistani students in Chinese less developed regions, this research aims to shed light on the specific factors that international students encounter when adapting to new academic settings and offer practical guidance for host universities to better support their academic adjustments hence to meet their academic growth. In addition, it offers valuable insights for academics who are keen to gain a deeper understanding of the unique academic challenges faced by Pakistani students in China. Academic adjustment, as defined by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001), pertains to the capacity of international students to acclimate to the academic and social demands of their new educational setting. It encompasses the acquisition of essential language and literacy skills, comprehension of academic expectations, and establishment of positive relationships with peers and teachers (Ward et al., 2001). The process of academic adjustment involves navigating through diverse behavioral and psychological changes aimed at enhancing academic performance (Ward et al., 2001). Drawing on these theoretical underpinnings, academic adjustment and the findings of scholars in first-tier cities in China, this study explores the academic adjustment of Pakistani students in Jiangxi Province, China with an aim to address the following questions:

1. How difficult is the academic adjustment of Pakistani students in second-tier cities in China?
2. What factors influence their academic adjustment difficulties?
3. What can host universities do to better support their academic adjustment?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview of Previous Studies on International Student Adjustment

Students' academic goals and objectives distinguish international students from other intercultural sojourners (Cao & Meng, 2022; Rahim, 2021). Most immigrant teenagers rely on schools and educational settings for intergroup interaction and acculturation. As a result, adapting well to school becomes a vital task and a critical aspect of the theory of acculturation or cultural adjustment expostulated by Berry, Phinney, Sam, Vedder, and Liebkind (2006) and Ward et al. (2001). Building on that theory of acculturation, Ward et al. (2001), was the first to propose a definition of academic adjustment for international students and distinguish it from social-adjustment According to academic adjustment refers to the ability of immigrant students to adapt to the academic and social demands of their new educational environment. This includes developing the necessary language and literacy skills, understanding the academic expectations, and building positive relationships with peers and teachers (Ward et al., 2001). The academic adjustment process involves trying to manage various behavioral and psychological changes that are designed to improve one's academic performance (Ward et al., 2001).

International students studying in a different socio-cultural context experience a unique cross-cultural academic adjustment process due to the disparities in teaching methods, language barriers, examinations, and the overall academic environment (Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018; Berry et al., 2006; Mao et al., 2023). Theoretically, when international students study in an environment with significant socio-cultural differences from their own, conflicts or discomfort may arise due to cultural background differences, which can affect their academic adaptation, as previously verified in research. Studies on the academic adaptation of international students in foreign countries have revealed many challenges that international students face during the cross-cultural academic adaptation process. In the cross-cultural context, language proficiency is considered the "difficult core" of international students' academic adaptation (Berry et al., 2006; Brennan, Binney, Parker, Aleti, & Nguyen, 2014; Frezghi & Tsegay, 2019; Hussain & Shen, 2019; Oberg, 1960), which is manifested in various aspects such as listening comprehension, text reading, essay writing, and oral expression (Wen, Hu, & Hao, 2018). Studies on international student in China big cities confirmed that language incompetency and socio-cultural factors,

significantly affected the academic adjustment process (Hussain & Shen, 2019). Language incompetency is a common issue faced by many students when they transition into a new academic environment (Oberg, 1960). It involves learning how to communicate with faculty members and students, as well as mastering academic writing in Chinese and discussing with professors (Wen et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies also revealed that various factors such as the new educational system, an unfamiliar academic environment, and the lack of research techniques and knowledge are some of the factors that challenge international students in China (Lwin, Aslam, & Mukhale, 2017). The third, socio-cultural challenges such as difficulties of attending student's organization, understanding campus culture, participating in extra-curricular activities, communicating in Chinese with Chinses classmates also contribute to international students' academic adjustment in China (Hussain & Shen, 2019).

However, all those studies are conducted in Chinese big cities, which makes the international students' voice unheard in other cities. Therefore, it is worth further exploring whether Pakistani graduate students studying in Chinese less developed regions, as a cross-cultural society, will encounter the afore-mentioned difficulties and challenges, or exhibit some unique characteristics.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

Due to the lack of a universal research framework on academic adjustment among international students, this paper relied on previous studies and identified 5 key factors influencing academic adjustment of international students, including class, assignment and exams, academic regulations & teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, extracurricular activities, and demographic information (including language level) of international students. The integration of these 5 factors forms the conceptual framework of this paper as shown in Figure 1.
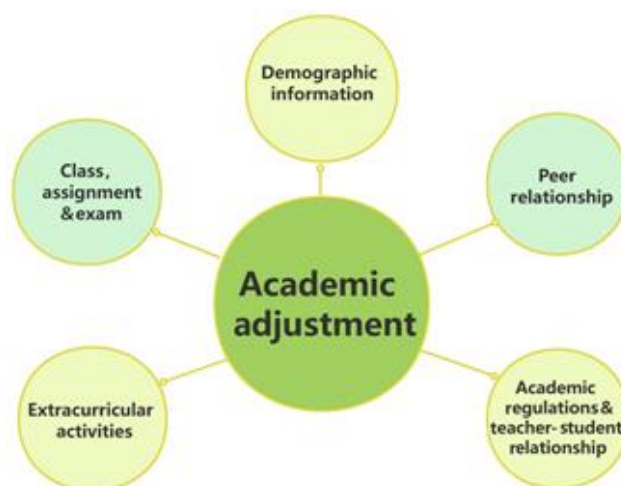

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data were collected through surveys using 134 questionnaires, while the qualitative data were obtained through interviews conducted with six students and three teachers. This mixed-method research design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, incorporating both numerical data and in-depth insights from participants.

3.1. Participants

The sample of this study comprised Pakistani students enrolled at three universities in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, including Nanchang University, Jiangxi University of Chinese Medicine, and Jiangxi Tellhow Animation College. A total of 134 valid questionnaires were collected from 150 distributed, with an effective response rate of

89%. Moreover, 6 Pakistani students and 3 Chinese teachers with frequent interactions with this group were selected for interviews and participant observation.

3.2. Instruments

This study adopted a 19-item academic adjustment questionnaire modified by Zhu (2013), a Chinese scholar. The scale contained 5 parts including class, assignment and exam, academic regulations & teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, extracurricular activities, and demographic information. Students answered each question on a scale from "not difficult", "slightly difficult", "moderate difficult", "difficult", and "very difficult." The higher the total score, the more difficult was for the student to adjust to the university environment. A difficulty coefficient was also used to see how hard it was for each student. The higher the difficulty coefficient, the more difficult was it for the student to adjust.

3.3. Data Analysis

A sociological research approach was used in this study which involved the use of questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in analyzing the collected data. Missing and invalid questionnaires were deleted by Excel software. The cleaned data was analyzed by SPSS 26 (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) and Smart PLS (Partial Least Squares), and $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant. To explore deeper insight into students' academic adjustment situation in Jiangxi, interviews were used to complement the results of the questionnaires.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of a study on a questionnaire measuring different types of student academic adjustment. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which measured the internal consistency of the items in the questionnaire. These results suggested that the questionnaire had a high internal consistency, with 4 dimensions Adaptation to Class, assignment and exam, Academic Regulations and Teacher-Student Relationship, Extracurricular Activities, and Peer Relationship, showing moderate to high levels of reliability. Please note that Table 1 includes only 18 items, as item 19 (as indicated in Table 5) pertains to a question regarding the preference for seeking help when facing academic challenges.

Table 1. Reliability statistics.

Cronbach's alpha	N	Items
0.900	8	Adjustment to class, assignment, & exam
0.810	5	Academic regulations & teacher-student relationship
0.788	3	Extracurricular activities
0.680	2	Peer relationship

4.1. Basic Information and Characteristics of the Sample

Table 2 presents demographic information about 134 Pakistani students studying in China, including their school type, gender, age, time spent (length of residence) in China, study program, major, overseas experience, Chinese language proficiency, prior knowledge about China, prior knowledge about the school and financial support. Overall, Pakistani students in Jiangxi province are mostly in their 20s, and many of them are pursuing their bachelor degrees. Besides, their Chinese level is moderate although most of them have stayed in China for more than 12 months. It is worth noting that, in this province, students are far more self-funded than scholarship supported.

The demographic information reveals that 122 students (91.04%) are from public schools, while 12 students (8.96%) have attended private schools; 108 students (80.60%) are male and 26 students (19.40%) are identified as female. In terms of age, this sample is very young with most respondents falling between 18-24 years in age (111

students, or 82.84%), 19 students (14.18%) are between 25-29 years, while only 4 students (2.99%) are above 30 years old.

Table 2. Demographic information of the survey (N=134).

Items	Category	No.	Percent (%)
School type	Public	122	91.04%
	Private	12	8.96%
Gender	Male	108	80.60%
	Female	26	19.40%
Age	18-24	111	82.84%
	25-29	19	14.18%
	Above 30	4	2.99%
Length of residence	1-6 Months	7	5.22%
	7-12 Months	24	17.91%
	13-24 Months	44	32.84%
	25-36 Months	28	20.90%
	over 36 Months	31	23.13%
Study program	Undergraduate	102	76.12%
	Postgraduate	7	5.22%
	Doctorate	25	18.66%
Major	Chinese language	22	16.42%
	Humanities & social science	18	13.43%
	Clinical medicine	94	70.15%
Overseas experience before coming to China	Have been to other countries	34	25.37%
	Have never been to other countries	100	74.63%
Prior Knowledge about China	Very much	49	16.50%
	Much	53	17.85%
	Moderately	96	32.32%
	Less	80	26.94%
	Very less	19	6.40%
Prior Knowledge about School	Very much	48	16.16%
	Much	48	16.16%
	Moderately	63	21.21%
	Less	81	27.27%
	Very less	57	19.19%
Chinese Proficiency	Very good	28	20.90%
	Good	44	32.84%
	Moderately	49	36.57%
	Poor	9	6.72%
	Very poor	4	2.99%
Financial Support	Government scholarship	10	7.46%
	Self-funded	124	92.54%
Total		134	100.00%

The largest group of participants (44 students, or 32.84%) have been in China for 13-24 months, followed by 31 students (23.13%) over 36 months, and 7 students (5.22%) less than 6 months. In terms of study programs, the majority of students (102, or 76.12%) are studying at the undergraduate level. Only 7 students (5.22%) are at the postgraduate level, while 25 students (18.66%) are at the doctorate level. Regarding major, a majority of students (94, or 70.15%) are studying Clinical Medicine, while 22 students (16.42%) are studying Chinese Language, and 18 students (13.43%) are studying Humanities & Social Science. In terms of overseas experience, 100 students (74.63%) have never been to other countries before coming to China, while 34 students (25.37%) have this experience. For the subject of Prior knowledge about China, 49 students (16.50%) reported having "very much" prior knowledge.,3 students (17.85%) reported having "much" prior knowledge, 96 students (32.32%) reported having "moderately" prior knowledge, 80 students (26.94%) reported having "less" prior knowledge,19 students (6.40%) reported having "very less" prior knowledge. Regarding the subject of School, an equal proportion of respondents, 48 students (16.16%) reported having "very much" and "much" prior knowledge. A slightly higher proportion, 63 students (21.21%), reported having "moderately" knowledge about School. In contrast, 81 students (27.27%) reported having "less" knowledge, and 57 students (19.19%) reported having "very less" knowledge about School. Regarding Chinese language proficiency, the largest group of students (49, or 36.57%) have a moderate level of proficiency; 44 students (32.84%) have a good level of proficiency, while only 4 students (2.99%) have a very poor level of proficiency. Finally, with respect to financial support, 124 students (92.54%) are self-funded, while only 10 students (7.46%) are receiving a government scholarship.

Table 3. Pearson correlation statistics (N=134).

Order	Descriptive statistics	Mean	Std. deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Gender	1.28	0.449													
2	Age	23.89	4.244	0.043												
3	Length of residence	3.42	1.415	−0.11	0.095											
4	Study program	1.94	1.557	0.209**	0.140*	−0.268**										
5	Major	2.33	0.841	−0.1	0.056	0.264**	−0.327**									
6	Overseas experience	1.63	0.483	−0.117*	−0.270**	−0.04	−0.139*	0.047								
7	Prior knowledge about China	2.89	1.164	0.169**	0.107	0.049	0.041	−0.04	−0.121*							
8	Prior knowledge about school	3.17	1.351	0.260**	0.181**	0.135*	0.05	−0.07	−0.131*	0.528**						
9	Chinese proficiency	2.58	0.973	0.129*	0.097	−0.04	0.089	−0.03	−0.05	0.361**	0.317**					
10	Financial support	1.23	0.419	0.113	0.250**	0.043	0.084	−0.133*	−0.157**	0.024	0.140*	0.132*				
11	Adjustment to class, assignment & exam	1.6546	0.78835	0.07	−0.135*	−0.153**	0.145*	−0.05	−0	0.137*	0.079	0.127*	0.039			
12	Teacher – student relations and school regulations	1.5926	0.75932	0.056	−0.124*	−0.147*	0.119*	−0.05	0.011	0.182**	0.107	0.105	0.007	0.773**		
13	Extracurricular activities	1.6532	0.85808	0.112	−0.05	−0.186**	0.1	−0.04	−0.02	0.175**	0.084	0.125*	−0	0.691**	0.706**	
14	Peer relationship	1.9478	0.89846	0.045	−0.116*	−0.117*	0.074	−0.06	0.08	0.127*	−0	0.135*	0.009	0.436**	0.449**	0.399**

Note: * $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$.
*Only Items significantly related with others are shown in this table

4.2. Academic Adjustment Difficulty Report

4.2.1. Level of Academic Difficulty

Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who rated different items in terms of their level of difficulty while studying in universities in Jiangxi Province, China. To assess the level of academic adjustment among students, they were asked to complete a Likert scale-based questionnaire consisting of five options ranging from "not difficult", "slightly difficult", "moderate difficult", "difficult", and "very difficult." as shown in Table 3. The survey data in Figure 2 was then classified into two distinct groups, namely "Not difficult" and "Slightly difficult to Extremely difficult", to facilitate better understanding for readers, as shown in Figure 2.
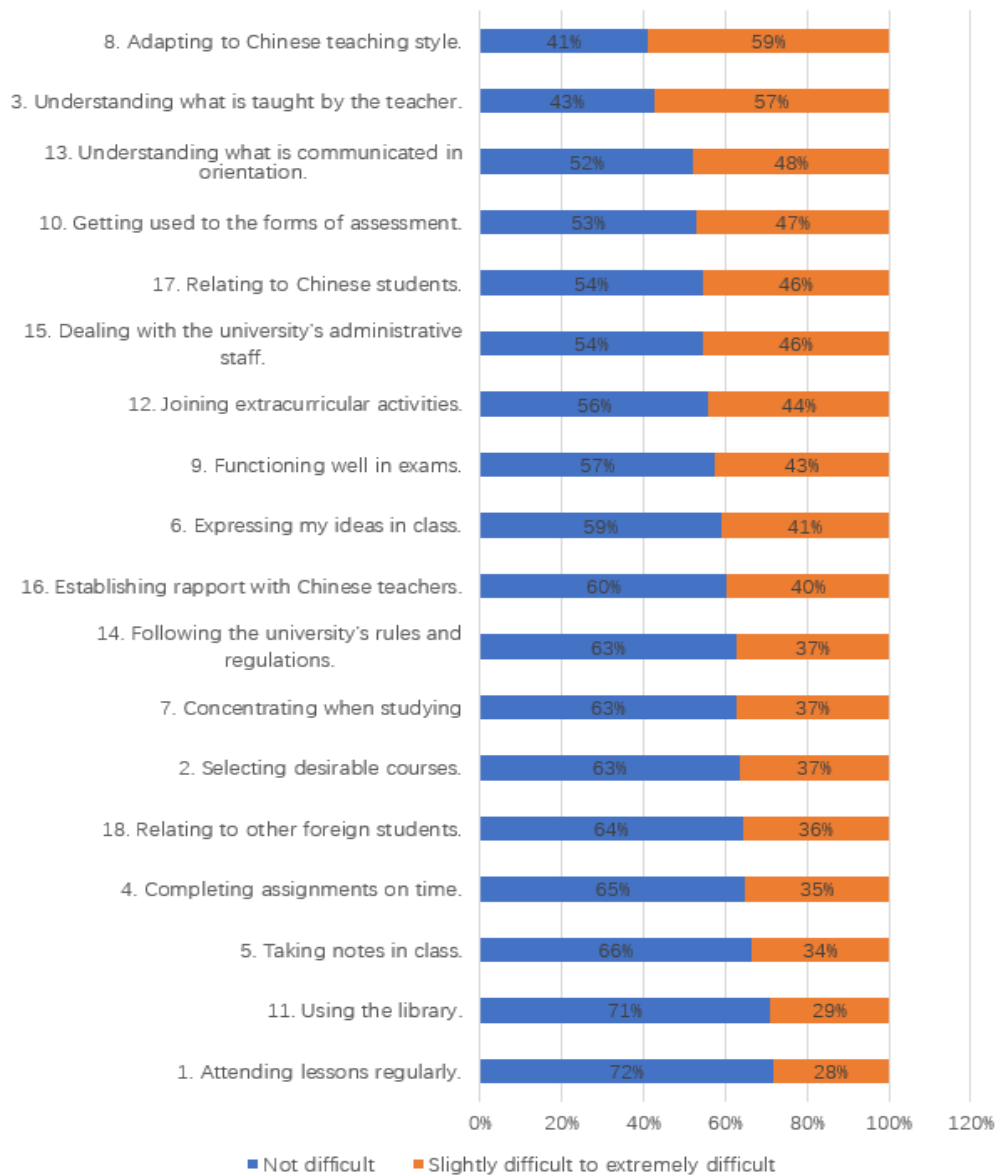
Figure 2. Academic adjustment scale (N=134) showing 'difficulty level in descending order.

The items are ranked in descending order based on the percentage of students who rated them as "Not difficult." The most manageable task was attending lessons regularly, with 72% of students reporting that it was not difficult. The second and third easiest tasks were using the library and taking notes in class, respectively, with 71% and 66% of students rating them as not difficult. The most challenging task was adapting to the Chinese teaching style, with only 41% of students reporting that it was not difficult, and 59% stating that it was slightly difficult to extremely difficult. The second and third most challenging tasks were understanding what is taught by

the teacher and understanding what is communicated in orientation, respectively, with only 43% and 52% of students rating them as not difficult. Overall, it appears that students found it easier to manage practical tasks like attending lessons and completing assignments on time, while they struggled with more academic-oriented tasks like understanding the teaching style and content. Additionally, it was relatively difficult for students to relate to other foreign and Chinese students, as well as to deal with administrative staff.

4.2.2. Preference of Seeking Help

Figure 3 indicates survey data on how international students at a university in Jiangxi, China would seek help when they encounter academic problems. According to the data presented in the table, 23.13% of the international students surveyed would turn to their family and relatives for help when encountering academic problems. 8.21% of the students would turn to their Chinese friends, and 4.48% would turn to other foreigners in China. Meanwhile, 17.16% of the students would seek help from their co-nationals, 22.39% would turn to their Chinese teachers, and 17.91% would seek assistance from the staff at the International Student Office. Finally, 6.72% of the students would seek help from "Others".
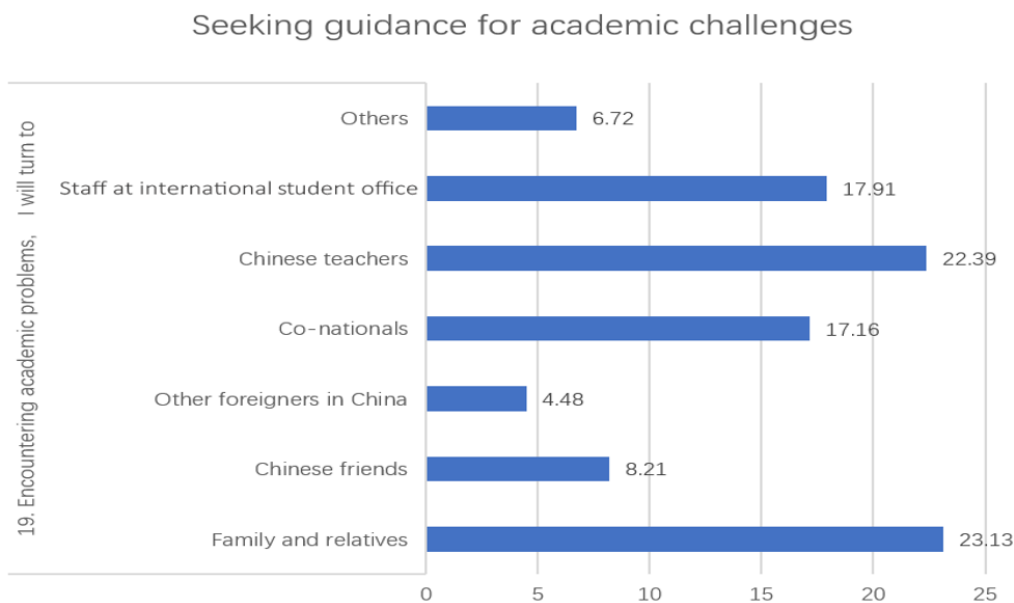

Figure 3. Seeking help for academic adjustment (N=134).

4.3. Correlation Analysis

To determine the significant relationships between the variables, we looked at the p-values (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019) in Table 3, where five demographic variables, namely Age, Duration in China, Study Program, Prior Knowledge about China, and Chinese Proficiency, were found out to be correlated with Adjustment to class, assignment & exam, Teacher-student relations and academic regulations, Extracurricular activities and Library, and Peer relationship. Prior Knowledge about China referred to the extent of students' knowledge about China before enrolling while Prior Knowledge about China referred to the extent of students' knowledge about their school before enrolling. Adjustment to class, assignment & exam showed a negative correlation with all five demographic variables; Teacher-student relations and school regulations had a negative correlation with Age, Duration in China, and Study Program; Extracurricular Activities however showed a positive correlation with prior knowledge about China and Chinese Proficiency. There was also a negative correlation with Duration in China; Peer relationship showing a negative correlation with Adjustment to class, assignment & exam and Age but there was a positive correlation with Chinese Proficiency.

4.4. Significance of Path Coefficients by Smart PLS

To investigate the internal relationship of academic adjustment scale, Smart PLS was utilized to construct a model that elucidated the impact of various factors on academic performance. According to Hair et al. (2019) the commonly reported indicators for evaluating the overall fitness of a proposed model are R2 (coefficient of determination), path coefficient, and significance (Hair et al., 2019). R2 is a statistical metric that gauges the proximity of data to the fitted regression line, indicating the extent to which latent variables can be explicated by manifest variables. The path coefficient between latent variables signifies the extent to which a change in one variable causes variation in other variables (Hair et al., 2019).

In this case, the R-squared value is 0.748, which means that 74.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (Adjustment to Class, Assignment, Exam) is explained by the independent variable (Teacher-student relations and school regulations, Extracurricular Activities, Peer Relationship and five demographic variables) in the model (Figure 4). The R-squared value (also known as the coefficient of determination) represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable in the model (Hair et al., 2019).
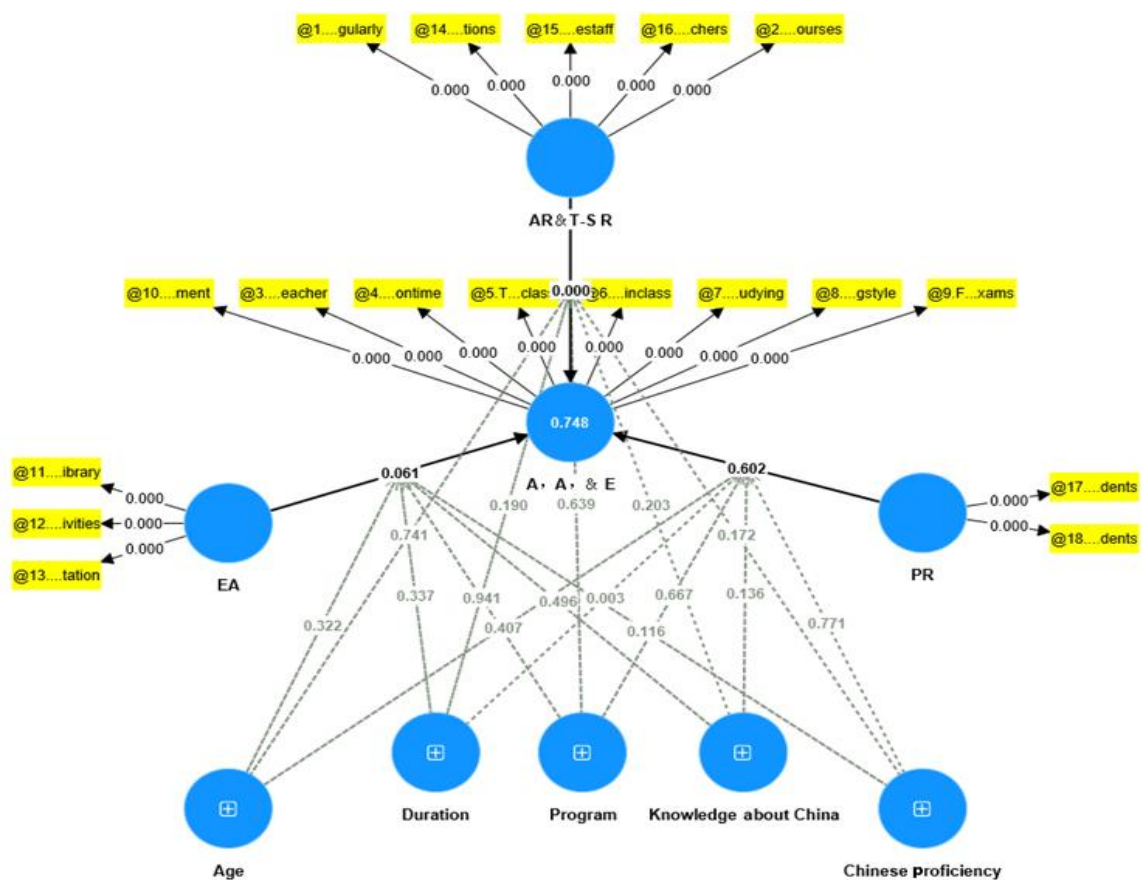

Figure 4. Regression analysis model.

Note: AR&T-SR= Academic regulations & Teacher-student relations.
A, A, & E.= Adjustment to class, Assignment & exam.
PR=Peer relationship.
EA= Extracurricular activities.

Table 4 shows the results of a statistical analysis using Smart-PLS. The analysis includes three variables: Academic regulations & Teacher-student relations, Duration, and Peer relationship. For each variable, the table presents the original sample (O), sample mean (M), standard deviation, T statistics, and P values. For the variable Academic regulations &Teacher-student relations, the sample mean is 0.728, and the standard deviation is 0.132. The T statistics is 5.471, indicating that the mean difference between the sample and the population is statistically significant at a confidence level of 95% (P value is less than 0.05). The sample consists of the values Adjustment to

635

class, Assignment & Exam. For the variable Duration x Peer relationship, the sample mean is 0.317, and the standard deviation is 0.111. The T statistics is 2.987, indicating that the mean difference between the sample and the population is statistically significant at a confidence level of 95% (P value is less than 0.05). The sample consists of the values Adjustment to class, Assignment &Exam. The Extracurricular activities, however, doesn't show any statistically significance to Adjustment to class, Assignment & Exam.

Table 4. Path coefficient.

Path coefficients	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
AR＆T-SR -> A，A，＆E	0.722	0.728	0.132	5.471	0
Duration x PR -> A，A，＆E	0.332	0.317	0.111	2.987	0.003

Note: * p<0.05 ** p<0.01.
AR&T-SR= Academic regulations & Teacher-student relations,
A, A, & E.= Adjustment to class, Assignment & Exam,
PR=Peer relationship,
EA= Extracurricular activities.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Strong Study Motivation and English Medium Courses Alleviated the Difficulty of Academic Adjustment

The study found that despite the obvious educational and cultural differences between China and Pakistan, and the low level of Chinese proficiency of Pakistani graduate students, this does not pose a serious challenge to their academic adjustment to China. Table 5 shows that the average mean difficulty score of all subjects' academic adjustment is 1.69, indicating a level of "slightly difficult". The academic adjustment scale items were ranked based on mean values, with the top five items listed from high to low as follows: "8. Adapting to Chinese teaching style", "3. Understanding what is taught by the teacher", "13. Understanding what is communicated in orientation", "10. Getting used to the forms of assessment", and "17. Relating to Chinese students". These results suggest that more than 50% of Pakistani students in universities in Jiangxi Province perceive "Adapting to Chinese teaching style" and "Understanding what is taught by the teacher" as difficult, while over 50% of students found all other items to be "not difficult".

Table 5. Information of the survey (N=134).

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard dev.
1. Attending lessons regularly.	1	5	1.552	1.03
2. Selecting desirable courses.	1	5	1.664	1.054
3. Understanding what is taught by the teacher.	1	5	2.045	1.182
4. Completing assignments on time.	1	5	1.59	0.967
5. Taking notes in class.	1	5	1.604	1.019
6. Expressing my ideas in class.	1	5	1.604	0.859
7. Concentrating when studying	1	5	1.575	0.929
8. Adapting to Chinese teaching style.	1	5	2.015	1.097
9. Functioning well in exams.	1	5	1.679	0.978
10. Getting used to the forms of assessment.	1	5	1.701	0.95
11. Using the library.	1	5	1.53	0.994
12. Joining extracurricular activities.	1	5	1.672	0.972
13. Understanding what is communicated in orientation.	1	5	1.769	1.018
14. Following the university's rules and regulations.	1	5	1.59	0.919
15. Dealing with the university's administrative staff.	1	5	1.784	1.072
16. Establishing rapport with Chinese teachers.	1	5	1.634	0.962
17. Relating to Chinese students.	1	5	1.828	1.127
18. Relating to other foreign students.	1	5	1.59	0.952
19. Encountering academic problems, I will turn to	1	7	3.881	2.004

After conducting interviews with 6 Pakistani students and confirming with 3 teachers responsible for international students, a strong study motivation emerged which explained why international students perceived

636

their studies as slightly academic challenges. For instance, Lee (28 years old, PhD student, major in Computer Science) said: *"The medical school entrance exam in Pakistan is very strict, with only about 20% of students passing the exam each year. Students who do not get admitted to medical school must choose expensive private medical schools if they want to study medicine. At this point, many students and parents choose to study in comprehensive universities or medical schools in second-tier cities in China because the tuition fees are moderate, there is no need for an entrance exam, and the cost of living in second-tier cities in China is not high"*. Xia (35 years old, administrative staff in Admission Office) confirmed: *"Every year we receive a large number of applications from Pakistani students to study at our university. Our medical program is very attractive to them. Coming to China to study clinical medicine has been rewarding. 70% of our graduated alumni who have returned to Pakistan have passed the national medical license exam. We are confident about our teaching quality here."*

Notably, as we can see from the demographic table (Table 2), a significant proportion (over 70%) of Pakistani students are pursuing Clinical Medicine in China. After the interview we found out that most of them had previously failed their medical exams in their home country. As a result, many Pakistani students had turned to China as a viable alternative for obtaining a medical degree. Therefore, most of them had a strong desire and motivation to study in China. Motivation is a crucial factor that can have a significant impact on students' academic adjustment. When students are motivated to study, they are more likely to engage in learning activities, set goals, and persist in the face of challenges (Gopalan, Beutell, & Middlemiss, 2019; Rahim, 2021; Sit, Mak, & Neill, 2017; Stoltenberg, 2011; Van Rooij, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2018). Besides, unlike other Asian countries, most universities in China use English as the medium of instruction.

Thus, the strong motivation and English medium courses may partly explain why Pakistani students found it easy to manage practical tasks like attending lessons and completing assignments on time, and more likely to persist in the face of challenges and setbacks, overcome obstacles and achieve academic success.

5.2. Language Barrier Hindered the Understanding the Teaching Style and Content

Although with strong motivation to study and the utilization of English medium course, the first year for Pakistani students in China remains to be a tough journey. They are struggling with more academic-oriented tasks like understanding the teaching style and content. More than 50% of Pakistani students in universities in Jiangxi Province perceive "Adapting to Chinese teaching style" and "Understanding what is taught by the teacher" as difficult tasks. Additionally, it was relatively difficult for students to relate to other foreign and Chinese students, as well as to deal with administrative staff.

In a later interview, we found that, although most universities in China used English as the medium of instruction, the communication between teachers and students was not very smooth due to language barriers. Both teachers and students do not use the native language when in class; teachers who are not very proficient in English accent often slow down the teaching process so that students can better grasp the curriculum knowledge. Meanwhile, students struggle to understand their teachers' English. Eventually, in some schools, teachers admitted they had to intentionally lower curriculum standards to meet test requirements. Such cases are relatively rare in other big Chinese cities, but common in less developed regions.

Student S (22 years old, MBBS student): *"When I first arrived here, I had a lot of trouble adjusting to the teacher's accent. While the teacher's professional knowledge was strong, they were not good at expressing themselves, and often I couldn't understand their spoken language. Later, we went to the library to do some preparation ahead of time, and the next day in class, I felt much better. Since then, I've been using this method of self-study to adapt to my learning."* Student H (22 years old, MBBS student): *"We rarely contact our teachers after class, and they usually just leave after class without answering questions. They generally teach what's in the textbook and use English, which limits their ability to express themselves, even if their medical knowledge is very rich."* Mr. Bob (40 years old, administrative staff responsible for international students) admitted: *"If we use the same graduation requirement on international students as we do on Chinese students, many of them might not graduate on time. That is why English medium and the courses set up for international students have been simplified*

as well." Ms. Song (51 years old, Professor) confessed: "*My colleagues and I have refused to accept the international PhD students for years, unless the students are good at the field and show mastery in both Chinese and English. Otherwise, it is hard for both supervisors and students to get through the whole journey.*"

Even though English is widely used as the language of instruction in many universities across China, there are still communication difficulties due to language barriers. Both teachers and students are not using their native language in the classroom, resulting in teachers having to slow down their teaching pace to ensure students can better comprehend the course material. Moreover, students are facing challenges in understanding their teachers' English. Consequently, in certain schools, teachers claim that they must intentionally reduce the curriculum standards to meet testing requirements. Although these cases are relatively infrequent in major Chinese cities, they are widespread in less developed regions.

In general, it is the language barrier caused by English other than Chinese that contributes to the biggest challenge to both teacher and international students in China less developed cites. One possibility is that the teachers themselves may not have a strong command of the English language, which can result in difficulty communicating with their students. This might be due to the unbalanced teaching resources in less developed cities in China where teachers in universities suffer from lack of opportunities and inadequate training in teaching a second language. On the other hand, in some cases, such as Chinese cultural course or Chinese traditional medical course, the curriculum may not prioritize English language instruction, or there may be a lack of resources available for language education.

5.3. Chinese Teachers, Family and Friends are Important Sources of Social Support to Alleviate Academic Adjustment Problems

When facing the problem of academic adjustment, about 23% would ask family and relatives, 22% would ask Chinese teachers, 18% would ask staff at the International Student Office, 17% would seek help from co-nationals, 8% would ask Chinese friends, and 4% would ask other foreigners in China. In general, Chinese teachers, family members and friends are important social support subjects for international students in dealing with academic adaptation issues.

Compared to prior research in the same domain, the present study revealed a higher proportion of international students who opted to consult Chinese teachers for academic assistance. Surprisingly, the current study found that the most frequently chosen sources of support were family and friends (Figure 3). This may be attributed to the fact that Pakistani students constitute the largest cohort of international students in the province, and are thus able to access readily available support from their social networks. Additionally, given their relatively low proficiency in Chinese language due to the English language widely used in their class and daily life, Pakistani students may encounter challenges in seeking assistance from Chinese teachers, leading them to rely more heavily on family and friends for academic support.

5.4. Teacher-Student Relations and School Regulations, Peer Relationship, and Duration in China Have a Significant Impact on the Adjustment to Class, Assignment, Exam of International Students

In this study, Smart PLS was used to measure the relationships within the scale. It indicated that 74.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (Adjustment to Class, Assignment, Exam) explained by the independent variable (Teacher-student relations and school regulations, Extracurricular Activities, Peer Relationship and five demographic variables) in the model (Figure 4) overall, it is a good starting point for further research and exploration into the factors that influence adjustment to class, assignment, and exam performance in students. Teacher-student relationships, school regulations, peer relationships, and duration in China have a significant impact on the academic adjustment of international students. Therefore, universities need to focus on these factors to improve the learning experience of Pakistani students and other international students studying in China.

5.5. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

It is important to note that international students studying in Chinese second tier cities are a diverse group, and this study only provides insights into Pakistani students, which may have limited generalizability to other Asian students.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the academic adjustment of Pakistani students studying in Chines second tier cities. It can be interpreted into positive and negative sides. On one hand, Pakistani students are experiencing a slight academic adjustment difficulty, Chinese teachers, family, and friends are important sources of social support to alleviate their academic adjustment problems, and Teacher-student relations and school regulations, Peer Relationship, and Duration in China have a significant impact on their adjustment to Class, Assignment, Exam of international students. The interview after the data analysis indicates that strong learning motivation among Pakistani students and the setting of English-taught programs play a very important role in cultivating Pakistani students studying in China.

On the other hand, the existence of deliberately lowered academic standard and unbalanced academic recourse raised the concern about the teaching quality of international students. It will not only affect the learning effect of students, but also bring great work pressure and challenge to teachers. In order to further improve the quality of education and academic adaptation ability of Pakistani students studying in China, this study proposes the following suggestions.

Although China has higher education quality and level compared to Pakistan, the lowering of teaching and training standards has led to a lack of guarantee for the quality of training, which has affected China's policy effectiveness in non-educational aid. A sound supervisory mechanism for the quality of education for international students studying in China should be established to ensure the strict implementation of teaching and training standards, and the construction of a quality assurance system for international students studying in China should be gradually improved.

While Chinese university staff need to improve their foreign language proficiency, international students studying in China should also improve their Chinese language proficiency in order to better adapt to their study and life in China. Universities can take several measures to effectively improve Chinese language proficiency. One is to adjust the original teaching plan that only offers Chinese language courses in the first semester or first year, and offer Chinese language learning courses throughout the entire process. Another suggestion is to increase the number of extracurricular Chinese language interest training courses, so that students studying in China can flexibly learn and consolidate Chinese language skills outside of class. Thirdly, it is encouraged to form language learning mutual aid groups in diverse forms and style between Chinese and foreign students to improve their language comprehension and application abilities in real communication and interaction scenarios.

The study also highlights the importance of learning motivation and the availability of English-taught programs in the successful academic adjustment of Pakistani students studying in China. Thus, schools should ensure that there are enough English-taught programs and motivate students to learn and participate in academic activities actively.

Pakistani students studying in second-tier cities in China face some academic adjustment difficulties but can overcome them with the help of Chinese teachers, family, and friends. Thus, it is essential to provide adequate social support to international students to improve their academic adaptation ability. Finally, the study proposes to improve the quality of education and academic adaptation ability of Pakistani students studying in China, which can also be applied to other international students.

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