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(IJEPC)<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepe>THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF
ACADEMIC ADAPTATION OF ASEAN STUDENTS IN
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In recent years, the number of ASEAN students studying at higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, has increased rapidly. Despite that, limited research has examined how these students adapt academically to the cross-cultural learning environment in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges. Therefore, it is essential to examine the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi. This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate cross-cultural academic adaptation from two perspectives: academic adaptation levels and academic adaptation challenges. The study finds that ASEAN students generally demonstrate good academic adaptation; however, they face four core challenges: high academic pressure, language barriers, insufficient academic support, and inadequate professional competencies and professional quality among teachers and staff. This paper proposes four optimization strategies to enhance the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students: encouraging ASEAN students to actively enhance their own academic learning, enabling teachers and staff to provide targeted academic support, strengthening institutional management and collaborative education practices in higher vocational colleges to address academic adaptation challenges, and promoting multi-level policy support to facilitate academic adaptation.

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Keyword:

Academic Adaptation, ASEAN Students, Challenges, Coping Strategies, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Higher Vocational Colleges



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Introduction

China and ASEAN have remained each other's largest trading partners for six consecutive years, and regional cooperation has entered a new stage of high-quality development. Guangxi is one of the 30 provincial-level administrative regions in China. It is located in the southwesternmost border area of China and borders Vietnam. As a crucial gateway connecting China and ASEAN countries, Guangxi has leveraged its geographical advantages and seized opportunities to internationalize its vocational education sector for over two decades. Guangxi has organized nearly 30 "Study in Guangxi" international education exhibitions overseas, further enhancing educational cooperation with ASEAN countries. Every year, Guangxi's higher vocational colleges attract thousands of ASEAN students, thereby facilitating talent exchange and industrial integration between China and ASEAN countries.

Existing research on cross-cultural adaptation among international students mainly focuses on undergraduate and postgraduate students, with only a few studies focusing on international students in higher vocational colleges (Xu & Stahl, 2025). Therefore, ASEAN students in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges constitute a distinct group in terms of a cross-cultural adaptation group. Helping ASEAN students in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges achieve better cross-cultural adaptation can not only enhance their learning experience and sense of achievement, helping them complete their studies, but also promote the internationalization of vocational education and increase the number of internationally oriented high-level technical and skilled personnel. Guangxi's higher vocational colleges have made great efforts to improve educational resources and professional standards to better serve ASEAN students. However, in reality, due to language differences, difficulties in professional studies, cultural differences, and individual differences among students, ASEAN students inevitably face challenges in cross-cultural academic adaptation (Haijing & Chano, 2024).

Therefore, it is essential to investigate the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, enrich localized theories of cross-cultural adaptation, help ASEAN students achieve more efficient cross-cultural academic adaptation, improve the education and management of international students in higher vocational colleges, and, in the long run, also holds a significant implications for regional vocational education cooperation, industrial collaboration and cultural exchanges.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural Adaptation

Research on cross-cultural adaptation began in the United States in the early 20th century. The concept was initially proposed in 1936 by American anthropologists Robert Redfield, Ralf Linton, and Melville Herskovits (Redfield et al., 1936). Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the phenomenon in which cultural contact occurs between two groups with different cultural backgrounds, leading to changes in the original cultural patterns or behaviors of one or both groups (Triandis & Brislin, 1984). It is a process in which participants transform themselves in a new environment and develop appropriate and effective communication skills. Later, Kim (2000) pointed out that when individuals or groups face the pressure of unfamiliar cultural environments, they continuously adjust themselves to adapt to the new environment as much as possible, ultimately forming an intercultural identity. In 1954, the Social Science Research Council further broadened the interpretation of cross-cultural adaptation, defining it as cultural system change resulting from the connection between two or more relatively independent cultural systems (Voget, 1963). This provides the theoretical and conceptual boundaries definition for this research.

Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory or Model

Most literature on cross-cultural adaptation focuses on the adaptation process of individuals after entering a host country, mainly including the dynamic model of "stress-adaptation-growth" (Kim, 2003), the U-curve hypothesis model (Lysgaard, 1955), the culture shock model (Oberg, 1960), the five-stage model of cross-cultural adaptation (Adler, 1983), and Berry (1997)'s model of cross-cultural adaptation stress and coping strategies. For example, Berry and Sam's (1997) model of cross-cultural adaptation stress and coping strategies holds that during the process of cross-cultural adaptation, individuals undergoing cross-cultural adaptation will encounter various pressures from different aspects. Individuals must continuously develop coping strategies to manage these pressures. This theory emphasizes individual agency, and individuals can actively develop strategies to achieve successful cross-cultural adaptation.

Some scholars have constructed different dimensional models of cross-cultural adaptation after cross-cultural individuals enter a host country, including the one-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation (Miller, 1984), the two-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a), the three-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation (Black & Gregersen, 1991), and the multi-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation (Gordon, 1968). For example, Ward and Kennedy (1993b) proposed the "two-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation," which argues that cross-cultural adaptation involves both psychological changes and socio-cultural changes, and is simultaneously influenced by both individual and social factors.

All the above theories provide theoretical guidance for understanding and studying the process, content, and dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation. However, they also have their own limitations. Moreover, with the diversification of the subjects of cross-cultural adaptation and the development of the process and content of cross-cultural adaptation, the existing theories cannot be applied universally. This study argues that Berry's (1997) model of cross-cultural adaptation stress and coping strategies is relatively suitable for the cross-cultural adaptation of

international students because it emphasizes the subjective initiative of the adaptation subjects. It does not regard cross-cultural adaptation as a linear or repetitive process. This study also agrees with Searle and Ward's (1990) two-dimensional cross-cultural adaptation theory and, based on the characteristics of international students, adds the dimension of academic adaptation.

Cross-cultural Adaptation Research of International Students

The main groups involved in cross-cultural adaptation include international students, immigrants, refugees, and expatriate employees (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). This paper mainly studies international students as cross-cultural subjects. They often face many difficulties and challenges when adapting to the new environment of the host country. These difficulties and challenges mainly come from language barriers, cultural differences, and academic adaptation pressure (Cao, 2024; Wei, 2026). International students commonly face language barriers in academic and social settings, which not only affect academic performance (such as understanding courses, accessing academic information, participating in academic projects, completing assignments, and passing exams) but also limit their social interaction and cultural integration (Zakaria et al., 2024). Language barriers lead to frustration for international students in classroom communication, academic writing, and daily life, especially for non-native English speakers (Tanasy et al., 2024).

There are also educational and academic challenges, such as host country curriculum content and teaching methods often being local student-centered and neglecting the cultural background and needs of international students, thus requiring international students to adapt to different education systems and teaching methods (Vallis et al., 2024). International students commonly experience homesickness during cross-cultural adaptation, leading to emotional problems such as loneliness, sadness, depression, anxiety, and identity issues, as well as dissatisfaction with the new environment (Mozafarinia & Tavafian, 2025). They also face cross-cultural social adaptation challenges such as social isolation, alienation, and difficulty integrating, and due to language and cultural differences, international students face difficulties in building friendships with local students and may experience feelings of isolation in social environments (Al-Habies et al., 2025). Current research all points to the fact that different cross-cultural entities will encounter cross-cultural adaptation challenges, but these challenges come from different aspects. Currently, most studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students are conducted in developed countries, in an English-language context, with the subjects being undergraduate or graduate students. Studies with background in less developed regions and international students from higher vocational colleges with lower undergraduate levels are relatively rare.

Cross-cultural Academic Adaptation of International Students

The concept of international students' academic adaptation was first discussed by Tinto (1975), who proposed that higher education institutions consist of two interrelated subsystems: the academic system and the social system. The academic system is concerned with students' academic achievement and intellectual growth, whereas the social system emphasizes interactions with peers and faculty members. Building on this perspective, Ballard (1987) described academic adaptation as international students' capacity to adjust to the academic environment of the host country, particularly its teaching approaches and learning practices. In the Chinese context, scholarly attention to international students' academic adaptation emerged

relatively later. Zhu (2011) defined the academic adaptation of international students as "the process by which international students integrate into the academic and social systems of their universities in the host country." This process involves not only academic performance and cognitive development but also engagement with the university community through peer relationships, teacher–student interactions, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Effective assessment of academic adaptation is crucial. Many scholars use the Student Adaptation Scale Questionnaire (SACQ) to measure the academic adaptation of international students (Gravini Donado et al., 2021). Scholars have developed different academic adaptation scales for international students based on different research objectives. For example, Anderson et al. (2016) developed the Academic Adaptation Scale (AAS) to measure short-term student learning adaptation, which consists of three dimensions: academic lifestyle, academic achievement, and academic motivation. Hussain and Shen (2019) categorized international students' academic adaptation into several dimensions: language proficiency, teaching methods, course arrangement, learning strategies, and library use. Zhu (2011) categorized international students' academic adaptation into several aspects: curriculum design, learning content, learning methods, assessment, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, extracurricular activities, and rules and regulations.

Based on Zhu's (2011) classification, this paper developed a cross-cultural academic adaptation scale for ASEAN students. The scale includes items related to: attending classes on time, choosing preferred majors and courses, understanding classroom content, completing assignments on time, taking notes in class, participating in class discussions, focusing on learning, adapting to Chinese teaching methods, interacting with teachers, attending lectures and reading Chinese books, participating in professional training, studying in study rooms or libraries, discussing learning problems with classmates, passing the course exams with a high score and adapting to the school curriculum and teaching materials (Lu, 2021). The above serves to define the scope and content of cross-cultural academic adaptation in this study and provides important guidance and reference value for the development of a cross-cultural academic adaptation scale that aligns with the context of the present study.

Methodology

Sources of Data

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China. First, experts were consulted, and three representative colleges were selected from among the higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, as the survey sample: one college that had recruited ASEAN students for only two years, one college with a moderate level of ASEAN students, and one college with a high level of ASEAN student management and recruitment. All participants were ASEAN students who had studied at higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, for more than one year. Second, a questionnaire survey was conducted using random sampling, yielding 304 valid questionnaires to obtain their demographic information, motivation for studying abroad, and their cross-cultural adaptation.

The questionnaire was distributed through the Wenjuanxing platform, which is a professional online questionnaire platform widely used in China. The counsellors from higher vocational colleges in Guangxi sent the link and QR code of the questionnaire to the ASEAN students

who had been in China for more than one year. Participants were informed that the questionnaire survey was completely anonymous, that the survey data would only be used for academic research purposes, and that the data would be strictly kept confidential. Participants voluntarily participated. Then, based on the questionnaire results and based on the voluntary participations principle, four ASEAN students from different nationalities were recruited from each of the three colleges, totaling 12 ASEAN students, for semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges they faced. Before the interview, the interviewee was informed of the research content, research purpose, the estimated duration of participation in the research, that participation is voluntary, participants could withdraw at any time, and the identities of participants would be kept confidential. Finally, based on the above survey information, this study explores strategies to help ASEAN students achieve more effective cross-cultural academic adaptation.

The reliability and validity of the motivation of studying abroad scale and the cross-cultural academic adaptation scale in the questionnaire were tested. The results are shown in Table 1. Regarding the motivation scale for studying abroad, its Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.896, and the KMO statistic was 0.911. Regarding the cross-cultural academic adaptation scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.905, and the KMO statistic was 0.879. Table 1 indicates that the reliability and the validity of the motivation of studying abroad scale and the ASEAN students' academic adaptation scale were all high.

Table 1. The Text of Reliability and Validity

Section	Cronbach's alpha	KMO
The motivation for studying abroad scale	0.896	0.911
The cross-cultural academic adaptation scale	0.905	0.879

Demographic Information in Questionnaire Survey

Among the 304 respondents in the questionnaire survey, as shown in Figure 1, Lao students were the most numerous (the frequency is 123, accounting for 40.46%), followed by Vietnamese students (the frequency is 94, accounting for 30.92%), Thai students (the frequency is 38, accounting for 12.50%), Indonesian students (the frequency is 34, accounting for 11.18%), Cambodian students (the frequency is 9, accounting for 2.96%), and Malaysian students (the frequency is 6, accounting for 1.97%). The respondents were relatively young, ranging from 16 to 30 years old, with the majority (accounting for 78.29%) aged 18-22, representing an age group with potentially unstable emotional and psychological states.

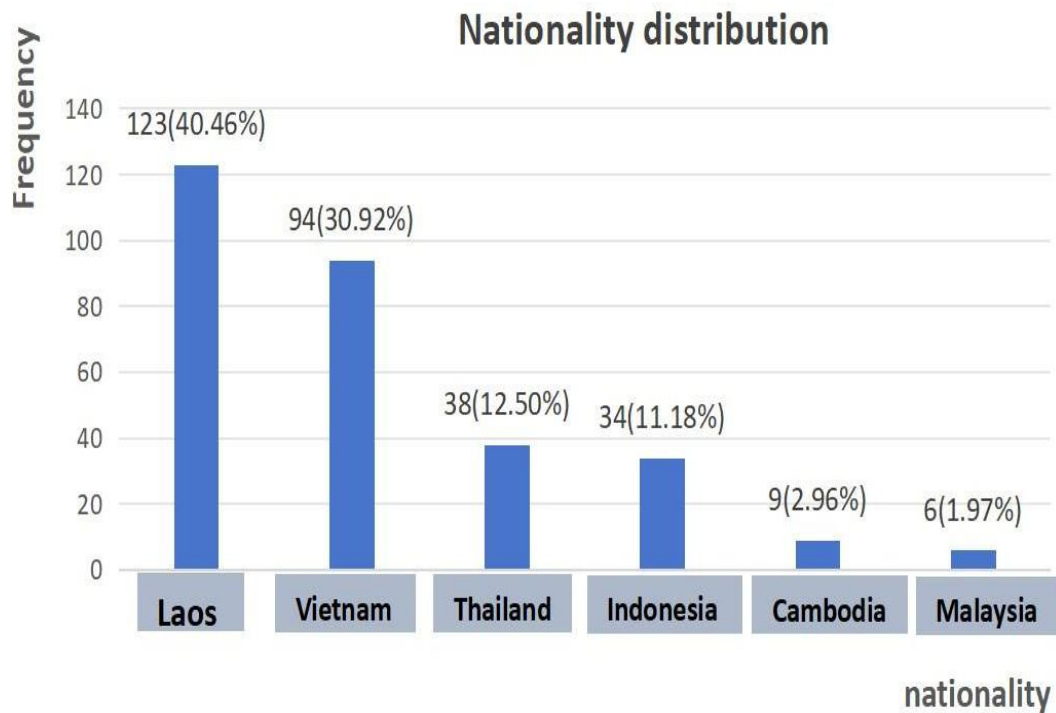


Figure 1. The Distribution of The Respondents' Nationality

As shown in Figure 2, among the 304 respondents in the questionnaire survey, only 9.87% of the respondents have gone abroad, while 90.13% of the ASEAN students have never gone abroad. Having no experience of going abroad means that for ASEAN students coming to Guangxi, this is their first time going abroad and also their first time facing cross-cultural adaptation issues.



Figure 2. Going Abroad Experience

As shown in Figure 3, the survey respondents are ASEAN students who have been studying in China for more than one year. The largest number of them, accounting for 45.72% of the total, had reached HSK Level 4. The proficiency level is HSK 3, accounting for 32.2% of the total, and ranks second in terms of the total number of participants. However, there were still 6 ASEAN students with HSK Level 1-2 and 7 ASEAN students who had not taken the HSK exam. These ASEAN students who have not reached the HSK 3 level will inevitably face significant challenges in their Chinese communication.

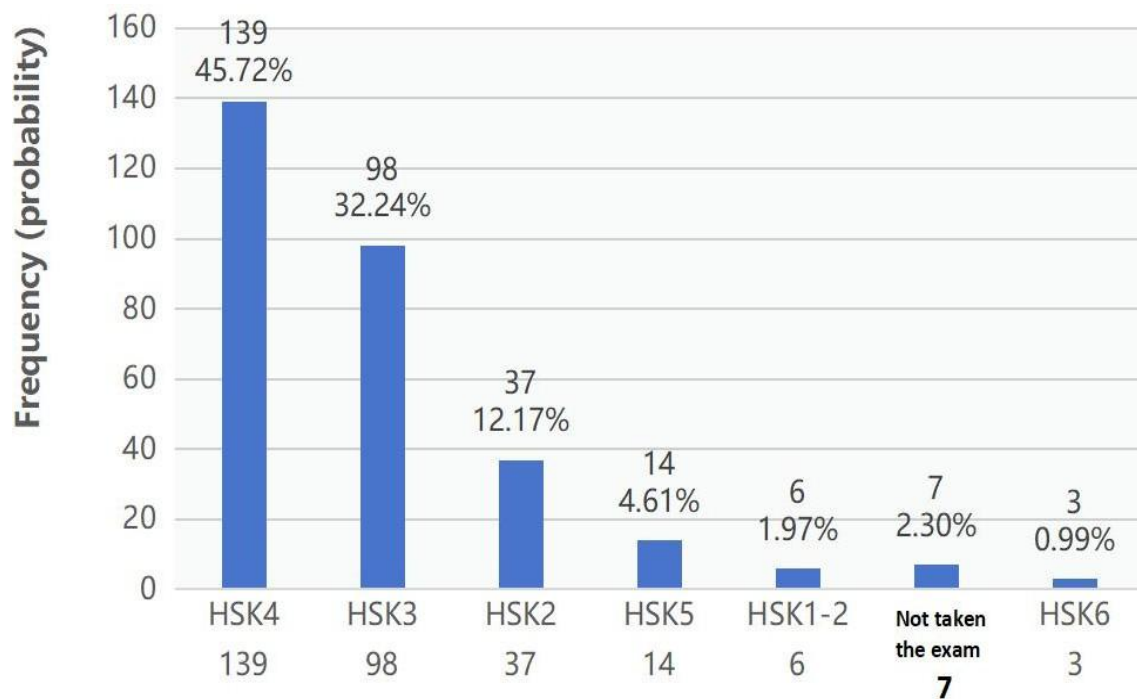


Figure 3. Distribution of HSK Levels Among Respondents

Information of The Semi-structured Interviewees

This study recruited 12 ASEAN students (4 from each of the three representative higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China) for semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges. As shown in Table 2, the respondents came from different ASEAN countries and majors and were aged between 18 and 22. There were 8 female and 4 male respondents, with females being more willing to participate in the semi-structured interviews. All the respondents in the semi-structured interviews had an HSK score lower than level 3 when they first arrived in China, but after one year of study, they had all reached HSK level 3 or above and could generally have basic Chinese communication.

Table 2. Information Sheet of Semi-structured Interviewees

Serial Number	Country	Age	Gender	Arrival time in China	First time at HSK level	Current HSK level	Major
1	Laos	18	female	9/2023	HSK 1-2	HSK 3	International Business
2	Malaysia	21	male	9/2024	HSK 2-3	HSK 4	Digital Media Art Design
3	Thailand	19	female	9/2024	HSK 1-2	HSK 3	E-commerce

4	Indonesia	19	female	9/2024	HSK 1-2	HSK 3	E-commerce
5	Cambodia	21	male	10/2024	HSK 2-3	HSK 3	International Marketing
6	Laos	19	male	9/2023	HSK 1-2	HSK 4	Architectural Engineering Technology
7	Indonesia	20	female	10/ 2023	HSK 2	HSK 4	Computer network technology
8	Vietnam	19	female	9/2024	HSK 2	HSK 3	International Marketing
9	Laos	20	female	10/2024	HSK 1-2	HSK 3	Logistics Management
10	Thailand	21	male	11/2024	HSK 1-2	HSK 3	Intelligent manufacturing
11	Indonesia	21	female	9/2023	HSK 1-2	HSK 4	International Business
12	Vietnam	21	female	9/2023	HSK 1-2	HSK 5	International Business

Results

The Motivation for Studying Abroad of ASEAN Students

The motivation for studying abroad scale in this study was developed based on Zhu's (2011) study motivation scale and the objectives of the present study and was compiled using a five-point Likert scale. It consists of 10 questions and is used to investigate the main reasons why ASEAN students go to the higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, for study purposes. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Very inconsistent") to 5 ("Very suitable"). The total score for the 10 questions is 50 points. The higher the from the stronger the motivation for studying abroad. The higher the average score of the question, the stronger the motivation for this item, and the more likely it is to be the main reason why ASEAN students go to the higher vocational colleges in Guangxi for study.

The motivation for studying abroad scale for ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi has a total motivation score of 39.31. 151 students (49.67%) scored below the total average score of 39.31, while 153 students (50.33%) scored above the total average score, indicating that more than half of the ASEAN students demonstrated strong motivation for studying abroad. As shown in Table 3, using the midpoint score of 3 as the benchmark, the average score was 3.93, higher than the median score of 3, demonstrating that ASEAN students have very clear motivations for studying in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, indicating that they possessed multiple positive expectations and study goals. The three questions with the highest average scores all exceeded 4 points. The scores, from highest to lowest, were like China (4.18 points), want to pass the HSK exam (4.11 points), and want to travel in China (4.09 points). This demonstrates that China's development, strength, and rich history and culture hold immense appeal for ASEAN students. It also indicates that these students represent a high level of trust and goodwill towards China, as their primary motivation for studying in Guangxi is their love for China and interest in travelling there. The second-highest score for "want to pass the HSK examination" shows that learning Chinese is one of the primary motivations for ASEAN students studying abroad, and improving their Chinese proficiency is a key skill and advantage. Obtaining scholarships, learning professional skills to meet employment needs, interest in Chinese culture, and the desire to work for Chinese companies are also important motivations for ASEAN students studying abroad.

Table 3. The Motivation of Studying Abroad Scale for ASEAN Students

Questions/Options	Very inconsistent	Not quite in line with	Generally	Somewhat in line	Very suitable	Min-value	Max-value	Average value	Standard deviation
6. like China	0 (0%)	1 (0.33%)	85 (27.96%)	75 (24.67%)	143 (47.04%)	2	5	4.18	0.86
5. want to pass The HSK Exam	2 (0.66%)	3 (0.99%)	89 (29.28%)	76 (25%)	134 (44.08%)	1	5	4.11	0.91
7. want to travel in China	1 (0.33%)	8 (2.63%)	90 (29.61%)	69 (22.7%)	136 (44.74%)	1	5	4.09	0.93
1. Like the Chinese language.	1 (0.33%)	2 (0.66%)	102 (33.55%)	90 (29.61%)	109 (35.86%)	1	5	4.00	0.87
9. Want to receive the scholarship	9 (2.96%)	6 (1.97%)	92 (30.26%)	71 (23.36%)	126 (41.45%)	1	5	3.98	1.03
2. Meet the requirements of the job	1 (0.33%)	5 (1.64%)	96 (31.58%)	101 (33.22%)	101 (33.22%)	1	5	3.97	0.86
3. Interest in Chinese culture	3 (0.99%)	3 (0.99%)	96 (31.58%)	103 (33.88%)	99 (32.57%)	1	5	3.96	0.88
8. Want to work for a Chinese company	4 (1.32%)	10 (3.29%)	121 (39.8%)	77 (25.33%)	92 (30.26%)	1	5	3.80	0.96
10. Recommended by others	8 (2.63%)	13 (4.28%)	117 (38.49%)	77 (25.33%)	89 (29.28%)	1	5	3.74	1.01
4. Has a low cost at this school.	7 (2.3%)	7 (2.3%)	182 (59.87%)	53 (17.43%)	55 (18.09%)	1	5	3.47	0.89
Subtotal	36 (1.18%)	58 (1.91%)	1070 (35.2%)	792 (26.05%)	1084 (35.66%)	1	5	3.93	

The Cross-cultural Academic Adaptation of ASEAN Students

This study investigated the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students and found that the overall cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi was good, but there were still many challenges. The academic adaptation scale in the questionnaire was developed based on the academic adaptation scale in Zhu's (2011) doctoral dissertation and combined with the objectives of the present study. It consists of 16 questions. As shown in Table 4, the cross-cultural academic adaptation scale for ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is as follows: the total average score is 3.58, which is higher than the median value of 3, indicating that the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is good. The top five items with the highest average scores were "Attending classes consistently, without being late or leaving early" (3.95 points), "Completing the assignments as required" (3.84 points), "Adapting to Chinese classroom teaching methods" (3.66 points), "Choosing a preferred major and courses" (3.64 points), "Adapting to different teachers' teaching styles" (3.62 points), and "Adapting to school curriculum and teaching materials" (3.62 points). These six questions represent the most basic aspects of cross-cultural academic adaptation for ASEAN students. The high average scores in these six items indicate that ASEAN students have met the academic requirements of higher vocational colleges in Guangxi. Furthermore, it demonstrates that ASEAN students have a positive experience in cross-cultural academic adaptation, including consistently attending classes, completing assignments, adapting to Chinese classroom teaching methods, and adapting to their majors and teachers. This suggests that the overall cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in

Guangxi demonstrates positive outcomes. Both ASEAN students and higher vocational colleges in Guangxi are very satisfied with their cross-cultural academic adaptation.

Table 4. Cross-cultural Academic Adaptation Scale for ASEAN Students

Questions/Options	Very inconsistent	Not quite right	Generally	Somewhat in line	Very suitable	Average score
1. Attend classes regularly, and do not be late or leave early	1 (0.33%)	6 (1.97%)	112 (36.84%)	74 (24.34%)	111 (36.51%)	3.95
10. Complete the assignment as required.	1 (0.33%)	2 (0.66%)	128 (42.11%)	86 (28.29%)	87 (28.62%)	3.84
8. Adapt to Chinese classroom teaching methods	1 (0.33%)	5 (1.64%)	154 (50.66%)	79 (25.99%)	65 (21.38%)	3.66
3. Choose your preferred major and courses	0 (0%)	10 (3.29%)	151 (49.67%)	80 (26.32%)	63 (20.72%)	3.64
7. Adapt to different teachers' teaching styles	1 (0.33%)	6 (1.97%)	162 (53.29%)	74 (24.34%)	61 (20.07%)	3.62
16. Adapt to school curriculum and teaching materials	2 (0.66%)	5 (1.64%)	166 (54.61%)	64 (21.05%)	67 (22.04%)	3.62
5. Able to take notes conscientiously during class.	1 (0.33%)	17 (5.59%)	148 (48.68%)	77 (25.33%)	61 (20.07%)	3.59
6. Focus your energy on learning professional knowledge.	2 (0.66%)	15 (4.93%)	152 (50.00%)	75 (24.67%)	60 (19.74%)	3.58
12. Actively participate in professional training.	2 (0.66%)	12 (3.95%)	161 (52.96%)	67 (22.04%)	62 (20.39%)	3.58
14. Frequently discuss learning problems with classmates.	6 (1.97%)	9 (2.96%)	154 (50.66%)	75 (24.67%)	60 (19.74%)	3.57
11. Become friends with your teacher	4 (1.32%)	20 (6.58%)	160 (52.63%)	64 (21.05%)	56 (18.42%)	3.49
4. Actively participate in class discussions in Chinese.	4 (1.32%)	29 (9.54%)	154 (50.66%)	62 (20.39%)	55 (18.09%)	3.44
9. Attend lectures and read Chinese books.	4 (1.32%)	18 (5.92%)	171 (56.25%)	61 (20.07%)	50 (16.45%)	3.44
2. Able to understand classroom content	3 (0.99%)	28 (9.21%)	150 (49.34%)	81 (26.64%)	42 (13.82%)	3.43
15. Pass the course exams with a high score	7 (2.3%)	10 (3.29%)	175 (57.57%)	70 (23.03%)	42 (13.82%)	3.43
13. Study in study rooms or the library.	9 (2.96%)	20 (6.58%)	179 (58.88%)	45 (14.8%)	51 (16.78%)	3.36
Subtotal	48 (0.99%)	212 (4.36%)	2477 (50.93%)	1134 (23.31%)	993 (20.42%)	3.58

However, some ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi still face challenges in cross-cultural academic adaptation. As shown in Table 4, while the frequency of selecting "Very inconsistent" (Inconsistency) and "Not quite right" (Somewhat inconsistent) was

relatively low, it still indicates that a small number of ASEAN students experience serious cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges. The five items with the lowest average scores (from lowest to highest) were "Study in the study rooms and library", "Pass the course exams with high score", "Able to understand classroom content", "Attend lectures and read Chinese books" and "Actively participate in class discussions in Chinese", indicating ASEAN students faced significant cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges in these five areas. Combined with the thematic coding results of the semi-structured interview records, it was found that ASEAN students demonstrated insufficient learning self-discipline in learning and had insufficient abilities in Chinese listening, reading, and application. The reasons for low examination performance were multifaceted, including insufficient support and guidance from course teachers, language barriers in class, the difficulty of examination content, and exams being in Chinese with short durations. Among the 304 ASEAN students randomly selected, the top three most frequent responses to "Very inconsistent" were: "Study in the study rooms or library" (9 students), "Pass course exams with high score" (7 students), and "Discuss studies with classmates" (6 students). The top three responses to the combined "Very inconsistent" and "Not quite right" were: "Actively participate in class discussions in Chinese" (33 students), "Understand the course content" (31 students), and "Study in the study rooms and library" (29 students). This cross-validation further confirms that a certain proportion of ASEAN students face significant cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges, and also further confirms the issues of insufficient self-discipline and language barriers among ASEAN students.

Types of Cross-cultural Academic Adaptation Challenges Faced by ASEAN students

The cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges faced by ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi can be categorised into four main types: high academic pressure, language barriers, insufficient academic support from colleges, and insufficient professional competence and quality among teachers. As shown in Figure 4, which illustrates the cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges faced by ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, these challenges are divided into four categories (the numbers in parentheses indicate the frequency of references): high academic pressure (86), language barriers (68), insufficient academic support from colleges (58), and insufficient ability and quality of the teachers and staff (36). Each category has its own sub-nodes. High academic pressure includes three sub-nodes: high academic pressure, high pressure related to internships and employment, and high pressure related to exams and scholarships. Language barriers include four sub-nodes: not being able to understand the lessons, barriers to social interaction with Chinese teachers and students, difficulty in reading the learning materials, and difficulty in seeking academic support. Insufficient academic support from colleges includes four sub-nodes: unreasonable course arrangements, insufficient educational equipment and learning resources, inadequate guidance on internships and employment, and insufficient academic training and tutoring. The insufficient ability and quality of teachers and staff include three sub-nodes: insufficient cross-cultural literacy, limited bilingual proficiency, and insufficient care and support for ASEAN students.

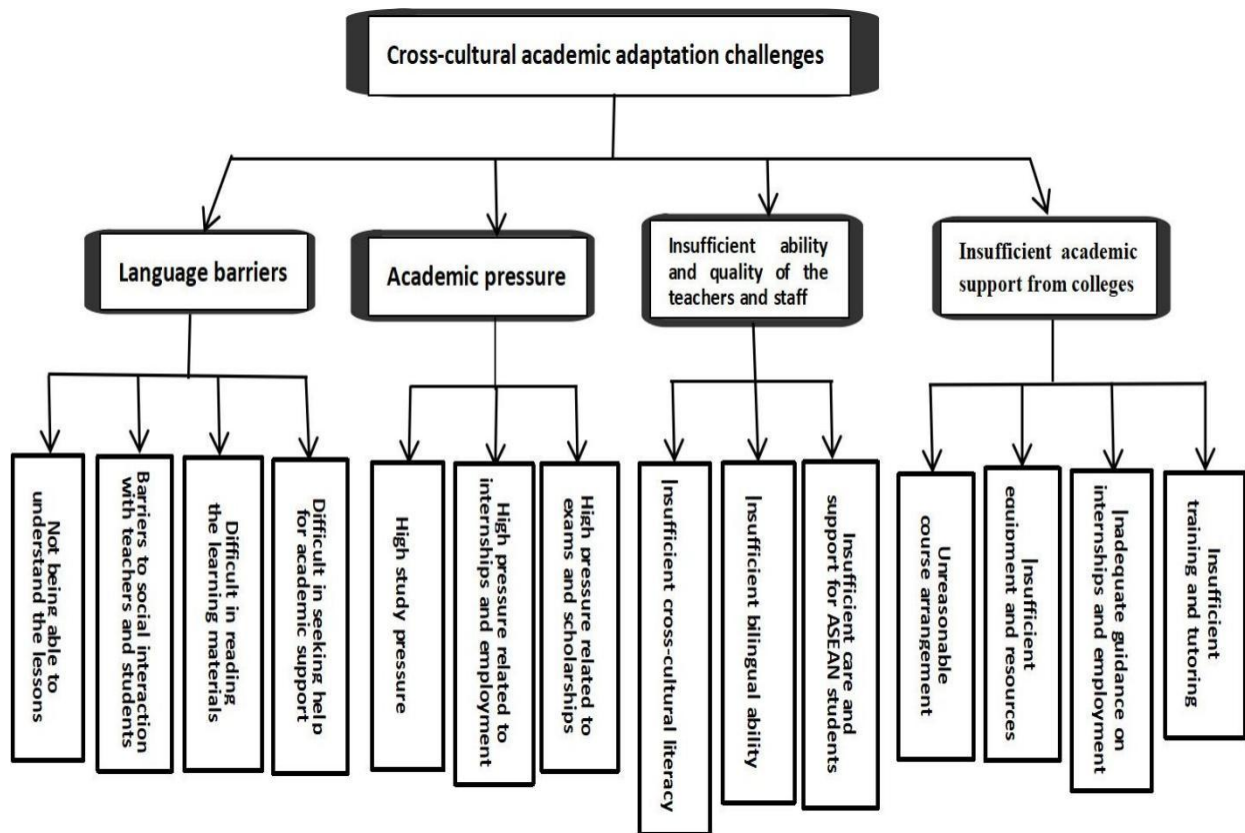


Figure 4. ASEAN Students' Cross-Cultural Academic Adaptation Challenge Project

Major Challenges in Cross-Cultural Academic Adaptation of ASEAN Students

The main manifestations of the challenges faced by ASEAN students in cross-cultural academic adaptation are as follows: high study pressure, not being able to understand the lessons, high pressure related to exams and scholarships, unreasonable course arrangement, inadequate guidance on internships and employment, insufficient cross-cultural literacy, insufficient equipment and resources, barriers to social interaction with teachers and students, high pressure related to internships and employment, difficult in reading the learning materials, difficult in seeking help for academic support, insufficient bilingual ability, insufficient care and support for ASEAN students, and insufficient training and tutoring. The above ranking is mainly based on the number of reference points for each sub-node, and the reference points are in descending order: 48, 27, 23, 19, 17, 17, 16, 15, 13, 13, 12, 7, and 6.

In NVivo 15.0, a hierarchical chart analysis of the coding for cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges was conducted based on reference point codes, resulting in a comparative hierarchical diagram of cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges faced by ASEAN international students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi. This hierarchical diagram was directly exported from the software, yielding Figure 5. As shown in Figure 5, the hierarchical diagram comparing the cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi was analysed based on the number of reference points assigned by character code for the parent node "cross-cultural academic adaptation challenges." The size of the area where each sub-node is located represents the severity of the challenge that

they pose in the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students. The larger the area, the more significant the challenge it represents.

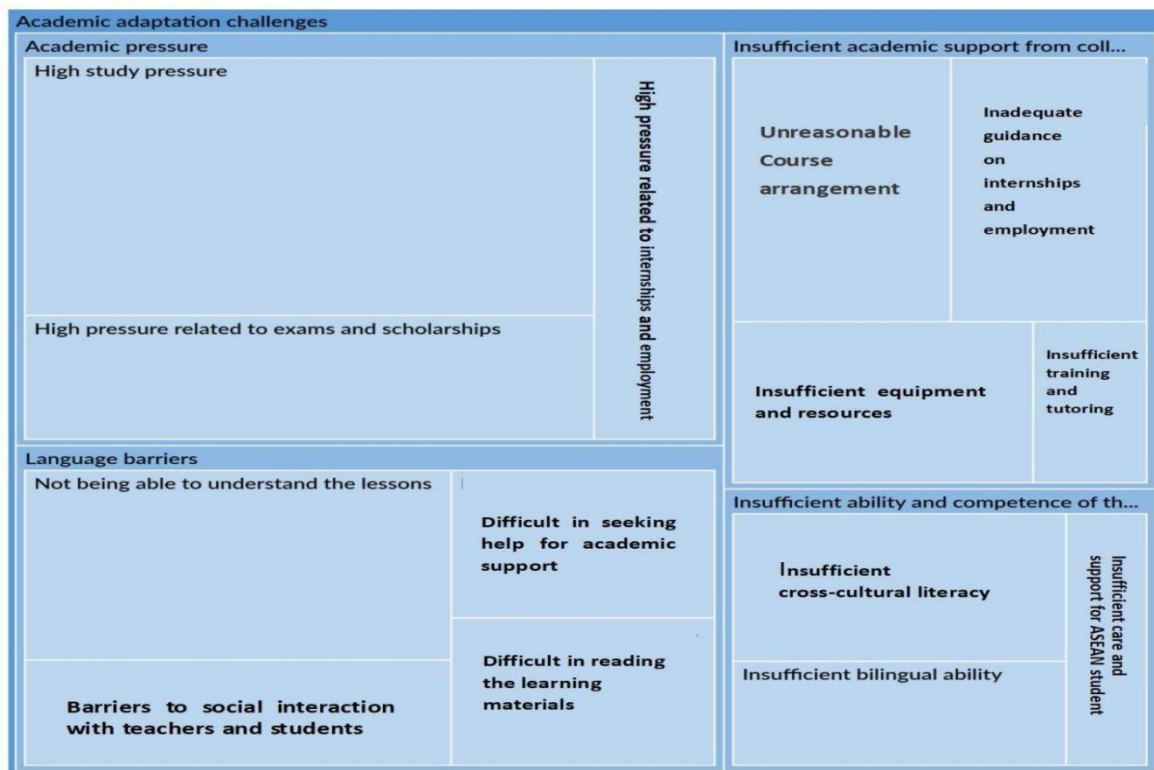


Figure 5. The Hierarchical Diagram of The Academic Adaptation Challenges

Analysis of the semi-structured interview data reveals that ASEAN students generally report significant academic pressure, primarily due to three main reasons: first, limited Chinese language proficiency and motivation among ASEAN students lead to problems such as not being able to understand the lessons and difficulty in seeking help for academic support. Second, the care and support for ASEAN students are insufficient. Third, the course arrangement for ASEAN students is unreasonable. Furthermore, these specific challenges interact with each other. For instance, a language learning disorder can lead to difficulties in understanding the lesson content, which in turn increases the study pressure.

Strategies for Cross-Cultural Academic Adaptation

In response to the challenges faced by ASEAN students in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges in their cross-cultural academic adaptation, including high academic pressure, language barriers, insufficient academic support from colleges, and insufficient ability and quality of the teachers and staff, this paper explores optimization strategies for their academic adaptation at four levels: encouraging ASEAN students to actively enhance their academic learning capacity, enabling teachers and staff provide to provide targeted academic support for ASEAN students, higher vocational colleges should strengthen institutional management and carry out collaborative education to address the challenges of academic adaptation, and policies at all levels provide safeguards for academic adaptation. These strategies aim to help ASEAN students achieve better and more efficient cross-cultural academic adaptation, thereby

promoting China-ASEAN vocational education cooperation and deeper integration between talent development and industry.

ASEAN Students Actively Empower Their Own Academic Learning

ASEAN students should actively improve their cross-cultural academic adaptability and actively motivate themselves to adapt to the new academic environment. As the core subject of cross-cultural academic adaptation, ASEAN students' intrinsic motivation for learning, Chinese language ability, and adaptability are the key internal forces to break through the barriers of cross-cultural academic adaptation (Haijing & Chano, 2024). First, ASEAN students should study diligently and improve their Chinese proficiency and study diligently and improve their Chinese proficiency and practical language application skills as quickly as possible. ASEAN students should actively engage with the "Chinese + skills" integration model and communicate in Chinese throughout the future work scenario created by the college and practice repeatedly to improve their workplace Chinese level (Qing, 2024). Deep experience the campus "cultural immersion" activities. ASEAN students should actively participate, make friends, communicate, and improve their daily Chinese communication ability. When conditions permit, ASEAN students should make full use of their spare time in China to experience folk activities and traditional festivals in Guangxi and other regions of China and continuously improve their cross-cultural academic adaptability. Second, improve the ability to adjust academic pressure and actively seek help (Newman, 2023).

ASEAN students should pay attention to the pressure they face in terms of study, exams and scholarships, have confidence in their studies, and adjust their academic pressure through various means such as rest, exercise and study. They should also improve their learning outcomes by studying hard and improving their learning efficiency. At the same time, they should actively seek academic support resources from the college and seek help from multiple entities such as professional teachers, counsellors, and classmates (Newman, 2023). Third, ASEAN students should plan their studies scientifically and rationally. ASEAN students should clarify their study abroad goals and formulate an academic career plan that integrates multiple goals such as improving Chinese language skills, applying professional skills, enhancing comprehensive quality and ability, and expanding social resources (Wang & Lent, 2022). The plan should be subdivided into each academic year, each semester and each stage and should be dynamically adjusted to guide their cross-cultural academic adaptation.

Teachers and Staff Should Provide Targeted Academic Support for ASEAN Students

As carefully selected teachers and staff responsible for teaching and managing ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, they focus on the core principle of "academic adaptation" and provide cross-cultural humanistic care for ASEAN students (Gomes, 2024). Teachers and staff should take the initiative to understand and respect the cultural customs, ways of thinking and learning habits of the ASEAN students they are assigned to and carry out teaching and academic assistance in a way that is suitable for ASEAN students (Talavera & García, 2024). In addition, they can formulate academic plans for ASEAN students and do a good job in daily learning supervision and academic progress tracking and help ASEAN students adjust their learning status in a timely manner (Wang, 2023). They should also help ASEAN students improve their Chinese language proficiency and solidify their academic foundation by adhering to a "Chinese + Skills" academic orientation (Gao, 2025). Teachers and staff should optimize teaching content and key skills training points, highlighting

and explaining difficult concepts, and recording videos of important practical skills for repeated viewing, among other measures, to proactively address any challenges and ensure the learning outcomes for ASEAN students (Zhang & Ouyang, 2024).

Colleges Strengthen Management and Carry Out Collaborative Education to Address the Challenges of Academic Adaptation

Higher vocational colleges should base themselves on the principle of "academic priority and collaborative management", integrate resources, optimize the talent training program for ASEAN students, carry out cross-cultural literacy training for all teachers and students, promote collaborative education among departments, strengthen academic resource guarantee, and build a high-quality teaching team to formulate cross-cultural adaptation assistance strategies for ASEAN students (Karimova et al., 2024). Ensure that ASEAN students can understand, read, and learn in all aspects, achieve better and more efficient cross-cultural academic adaptation, successfully complete their studies, and return with a full harvest of academic achievements. Based on the academic foundation, Chinese proficiency, motivation of study abroad and the industrial development needs of the source country of ASEAN students, formulate scientific and effective talent training programs for ASEAN students according to local conditions, ensure that the training objectives meet the needs of career development, and match the learning ability of ASEAN students with the curriculum settings (Wang, 2022). Then, carry out cross-cultural literacy improvement training throughout the college and create a good cross-cultural academic atmosphere, and promote collaborative education among all secondary colleges and departments and strengthen academic management of ASEAN students (Karimova et al., 2024).

Policies at All Levels Provide Support for Academic Adaptation

The cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi not only affects their academic performance, but also involves the management of higher vocational colleges, and also impacts regional industrial integration and diplomatic relations between countries (Handrianto et al., 2025). It requires policies and solutions at multiple levels, including the government, education departments, and higher vocational colleges, to address the challenges of cross-cultural academic adaptation from the root of the system, thereby providing support for the cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students (Liu & Tuntinakhongul, 2024). Guangxi government departments should design a cross-border collaboration mechanism at the top level, promote the alignment of vocational education standards between China and ASEAN, and improve visa and cross-border services (Li et al., 2024). It is also necessary to clarify the rights and interests of ASEAN students and the complaint feedback mechanism at the institutional level and optimise economic support policies such as scholarships and grants (Khoso et al., 2024). The education department should establish and improve the mechanism for matching the training of ASEAN students with the needs of ASEAN industries and the qualification review and filing system for higher vocational colleges to recruit and manage international students (Feng, 2025). Through the dynamic adjustment mechanism of enrollment scale, it should ensure that the enrollment scale, nationality structure and talent needs of ASEAN students are accurately matched (Fry & Glennon, 2025). Higher vocational colleges should improve their convergence management systems by taking into account the differences in teaching and administration for ASEAN students, and establish robust academic advising, academic support, and early academic

warning mechanisms to address the challenges of academic adaptation faced by these students (Yang & Leksansern, 2025).

Conclusion

This study uses a questionnaire-based scale to assess the status of cross-cultural academic adaptation of ASEAN students and explores the specific challenges they face through semi-structured interviews, including the severity of these challenges. Based on the survey findings and the actual situation of vocational colleges in Guangxi, this study proposes several strategies to help ASEAN students achieve more effective and sustainable cross-cultural academic adaptation. As a relatively underdeveloped region in China, Guangxi can be an important reference for other underdeveloped regions in terms of international student education and management. In the past two years, vocational colleges in Guangxi have attracted a large number of ASEAN students, making the issue of cross-cultural academic adaptation increasingly pressing and in need of urgent attention. At the same time, research in this field is still limited. Therefore, this study is not only able to provide practical solutions to current issues but also contributes to filling the theoretical gap regarding the cross-cultural academic adaptation of international students in vocational institutions. However, this study has several limitations. This study only involves three vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, as the study sample. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more higher vocational colleges in Guangxi to identify differences in the level of cross-cultural academic adaptation among ASEAN students. In addition, this study largely relies on self-reported data from ASEAN students and the views of teachers and frontline staff. Therefore, future research is recommended to also involve college management at various levels as well as officials from government and education departments in Guangxi to produce more comprehensive and objective findings.

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