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THE INFLUENCES OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON  
ACADEMIC ADAPTATION OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS STUDYING IN MALAYSIA:  
A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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**Abstract:**

The past five years witnessed a significant increase in the number of Chinese international students enrolling in Malaysian universities. For international students, adapting to the host country's educational environment is a crucial theme during their studies, and the effectiveness of their academic adaptation is key to completing their studies. The researcher found that language proficiency is commonly concluded as one of the crucial influencing factors of academic adaptation in the studies of international students. Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country, and its unique linguistic environment and cultural background bring different challenges to international students in their academic adaptation. This study systematically reviews the studies on the influence of language proficiency on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students studying in Malaysia from 2020 to 2025. By identifying literature gaps in publishing time, sample characteristics, topics, research methods and theories, this review aims to inspire further research and enrich future achievements in this area.

**Keywords:**

Academic Adaptation, Language Proficiency, Chinese International Students

**Introduction**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a strategic vision aimed at enhancing international cooperation. In response, China's Ministry of Education released the "Action Plan for Promoting Jointly Building the Belt and Road," which emphasizes the creation of an educational cooperation network among participating countries.

The BRI has significantly facilitated the cross-border movement of academic talents among countries along its routes, contributing to a steady increase in the number of Chinese students pursuing overseas education. As the leading country in terms of outbound student numbers, China has sent millions of students abroad for higher education opportunities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). According to recent data, over 1.3 million Chinese students are currently studying in more than 100 countries worldwide (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

As an emerging educational center in Asia (Shafaei et al., 2016), Malaysia has attracted an increasing number of international students, particularly from China. Official statistics indicate that, as of 2023, approximately 39,000 Chinese students were enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. This group represents the largest proportion of international students in the country, accounting for 38% of the total foreign student population (Statista Research Department, 2023). However, the current academic community does not pay much attention to Chinese students studying in Malaysia.

Academic adaptation plays a critical role in students' success during their university years. Previous research suggests that students' ability to adapt academically has a direct influence on their academic outcomes (Singh, 2013). Therefore, understanding how students adapt to academic environments is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. While all students must undergo a transition when entering a new academic setting, this process is often more complex for international students. Unlike their domestic peers, international students must adjust to new academic expectations and unfamiliar cultural and educational systems (Javad, Yaghout, & Jun-fang He, 2020). Through academic reading, the researcher found that previous studies have demonstrated the difficulties and obstacles commonly encountered by Chinese international students while studying in Malaysia.

Among the studies of academic adaptation, the researcher found that language proficiency is commonly mentioned. It has been consistently concluded as one of the crucial factors influencing the academic adaptation of international students in most research studies. Language proficiency assesses the student's ability to understand and use the language of instruction effectively, which is often a significant factor in their academic success. It includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, which are essential for engaging with course materials, participating in discussions, and completing assessments (Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023).

Malaysia is a non-Anglophone country, but most international students in Malaysia need to use English as the learning language, which is one of the main differences between international students in Malaysia and those in other English-speaking countries. Therefore, in this study, the language proficiency of Chinese international students in Malaysia specifically refers to their English proficiency. The findings of this review present the influence of language proficiency on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysia, as well as the current research status.

This study systematically reviews the academic adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysia from 2020 to 2025. By identifying gaps in the literature regarding publishing time, sample characteristics, topics, and research methods and theories, this review aims to inspire further research that will enrich future achievements in this area. This paper answers two

research questions. What is the research status of the influence of language proficiency on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students studying in Malaysia from 2020 to 2025? What are the gaps in the literature on the influence of language proficiency on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students studying in Malaysia from 2020 to 2025?

## **Methodology**

### ***Sources***

To better understand the current landscape of research on international students' academic adaptation in intercultural contexts, this study conducted a comprehensive literature search using key terms such as "international students," "academic adaptation," "language proficiency," and "Malaysia." Sources included the Electronic Resource Library of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, as well as databases such as Wiley, Springer, EBSCO, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar.

### ***Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria***

According to the questions of this review, the selected articles meet the following criteria: (a) Include samples of Chinese international students in Malaysia, (b) investigate academic/cross-cultural adaptation, (c) include language proficiency as an influencing factor of academic adaptation, (d) published in English, and (e) published in journals between 2020 and 2025.

### ***Search Procedure***

"International students", "academic adaptation", "language proficiency", and "Malaysia" were the focus of this review, and all possible combinations and derivations related to the four words were searched as keywords. Specifically, search terms were used to identify articles mainly targeting international Chinese students. Because the terms "academic adaptation" and "academic adjustment" are often used interchangeably in research (Nachatar Singh & Jack, 2022), both are listed as keywords. In addition, language ability is also listed as a keyword because it is used as a surrogate word for language proficiency in some studies (Lashari, Awang-Hashim, Lashari & Kaur, 2023). All searches were conducted in December 2024.

After an initial search, the researcher retrieved 170 articles from Scopus, Google Scholar, and other sources, and identified a total of nine articles that met the inclusion criteria. Specific information about the selected articles is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Information on the Articles Selected**

References	Sample	Focus Topics	Research Design	Main Findings
Singh (2020)	n=33 International students	Academic Resilience	Qualitative Research Approach	Insufficient English language proficiency significantly impacts international students' academic adaptation in Malaysia.
Wang, Muthukrishnan, and Mary (2020)	n=300 international undergraduates	Intercultural Sensitivity, Knowledge Sharing	Quantitative Research Approach	Academic adaptation was indirectly related to their language skills.
Ma and Vijayaratnam (2020)	n=10 Chinese students	Chinese Foreign Students, English Learning	Qualitative Research Approach	Interactive and communicative classroom activities would help them improve their English-speaking skills for both academic and practical purposes.
Taly and Paramasivam (2020)	n=17	Academic Speaking, Speaking Anxiety	Qualitative Research Approach	Support from lecturers and peer interactions can help students manage their anxiety and improve their academic performance.
Li, Qian, and Rao (2021)	n=83 Chinese Undergraduates	Intercultural Adaptation	Quantitative Research Approach	Language ability directly affects international students' academic adaptation and social interaction skills.
Nachatar Singh and Jack (2022)	n=55 33 students, 10 academic staff, 12 professional staff	Academic Success, Adjustment, Linguaculture	Qualitative Research Approach	Language and cultural differences significantly impacted the academic adaptation of international graduate students in academic writing, classroom interactions, and group collaborations.
Lashari, Awang-Hashim, Lashari, and Kaur (2023)	n=675	Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Psychological Adjustment, English Language Proficiency	Quantitative Research Approach	English language proficiency significantly predicts the academic, social, and psychological adaptation of international students.

Bi and Ahmad (2024)	n=15 Chinese postgraduates	Academic Adaptation	Qualitative Research Approach	The key factors influencing academic adaptation are language proficiency, mentor-student relationship, differences in teaching methods, academic support, and emotional support.
Rohman, Ashari, and Johari (2024)	n=20 international students	Cultural Adaptation	Qualitative Research Approach	English language barriers hinder both academic success and social integration.

Source: Summarized from Selected Articles

### ***Publication Date***

Overall, there are only nine studies on the influences of language proficiency on academic adaptation of Chinese international Students studying in Malaysia since 2020, with an average of only 1.8 articles per year, of which four articles were published in 2020. This is related to the rapid growth of the number of students studying abroad in China since 2020 and the development of higher education in Malaysia. The Belt and Road Big Data Report (2018) indicates that Malaysia is one of the countries that pays the most attention to talent development along the BRI. According to the data released in The Global Competitiveness Report (2019), Malaysia's education system, school management quality, research and development, as well as training capabilities, are slightly inferior to those of Russia, but far ahead of the other three countries along the BRI (Thailand, India, Pakistan). In the World University Rankings 2025: Top global universities (2024), published in 2024, 5 universities in Malaysia are among the top 200. The booming higher education, the use of English as the medium of instruction, and the relatively low cost of studying abroad are the main reasons why Malaysia attracts a large number of foreign students. However, the number of studies on Chinese students does not match the large number of Chinese students going to Malaysia for school.

### ***Sample Characteristics***

Of the nine articles, only three focus on Chinese international students studying in Malaysia (Ma & Vijayaratnam, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Bi & Ahmad, 2024). The other six articles are based on a sample of international students from around the world, including Chinese students (Singh, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Lashari et al., 2023; Rohman et al., 2024).

Six studies were conducted at public universities in Malaysia and three at private universities. This may be related to the natural advantages of public universities in attracting international students, such as the high ranking in the global education market and lower tuition fees. However, seven of these studies were conducted in one to five universities, so the data obtained were limited by the sampling. The three articles focusing on the academic adaptation of Chinese students in Malaysia included samples of 10, 15, and 83 Chinese students, respectively. The small sample size lacks a comparison of the academic adaptation of Chinese students from different universities, making it difficult to present a general picture of the academic adaptation of Chinese students in Malaysia. Of these nine studies, seven were sampled only among students, while two included additional participants, including lecturers, academic staff, and professional staff, to gain a richer perspective on discussing academic adaptation among international students. Except for one study that did not specifically address

the student level of studying, three studies were sampled among undergraduates, and others among postgraduate students, with a higher proportion of doctoral students. Specific information on this example is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Sample Characteristics of the Selected Literature**

Nationalities	Sample Size	Gender	Level of Programs	Location	References	Number of Articles
Chinese students	n=10	Not listed	Pre-sessional English programs	Universities in Malaysia	Ma and Vijayaratham (2020)	3
	n=83	Not listed	Undergraduates	A public university in China	Li, Qian, and Rao (2021)	
	n=15	8 males, 7 females	5 master students, 10 PHD students	5 Malaysian public universities	Bi and Ahmad (2024)	
	n=33	21 male, 12 female	23 PhD students and 10 Master's students	A research university in Malaysia	Singh (2020)	
	n=300	54% male, 46% female	Undergraduate students	Three private universities in Malaysia	Wang, Muthukrishnan, and Mary (2020)	
Chinese students as one of the samples	n=17 (15 students, 2 lecturers)	7 male, 8 female	Master's program;	A university in Malaysia	Taly and Paramasivam (2020)	6
	n=55 (33 students, 10 Academic Staff, 12 Professional Staff)	21 male, 12 female students	Not listed	A public university in Malaysia	Nachatar Singh and Jack (2022)	
	n=675	227 females (34%)	383 PhD students (44%), 292	Three public universities in Malaysia	Lashari, Awang-Hashim,	



n=20	and 448 males (66%) Not listed	Master's students (56%); Undergradua tes and postgraduate s	Public and private universities in Malaysia	Lashari, and Kaur (2023) Rohman, Ashari, and Johari (2024)
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Source: Summarized from Selected Articles

### ***Focus Topics***

From 2020 to 2025, the topic of these studies, ranging from Academic Resilience, Intercultural Sensitivity, English Learning, gradually turning to the Intercultural Adaptation, Academic Success, Academic Adjustment, and eventually, studies focused on Academic Adaptation and language proficiency emerged (Singh, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Lashari et al., 2023; Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Rohman et al., 2024). In earlier studies, language proficiency was mentioned as one of the influencing factors of academic adaptation. Insufficient English language proficiency was found to significantly impact international students' academic adaptation in Malaysia (Singh, 2020). International students struggle with academic listening, comprehension and writing, classroom participation, and communication with supervisors and peers (Singh, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Lashari et al., 2023; Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Rohman et al., 2024). Consequently, the researchers gradually found that language proficiency directly affects international students' academic adaptation (Li, Qian, & Rao, 2021). Its influence was so significant that it needs more in-depth studies.

Nachatar & Jack (2022) determined that English proficiency and cultural differences are the key factors affecting the academic adaptation of international graduate students. Language barriers, such as grammar and sentence structure issues, and the challenges of cultural differences in group assignments, lecture comprehension, and academic writing, all significantly influence academic success.

Lashari et al. (2023) suggested that English language proficiency is a key factor in the academic, social, and psychological adaptation of international students. Good language skills help to reduce cultural adaptation stress and enhance students' social support networks, thus promoting academic and psychological adaptation. Universities should provide effective language support and cultural adaptation courses to help international students better adapt to the new environment.

Bi and Ahmad (2024) identified language proficiency as a critical factor affecting the academic adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian universities. Most international students encounter significant language-related challenges that impact their academic performance. Students initially reported understanding only 30-50% of lectures, partly due to the Malaysian English accents (Bi & Ahmad, 2024). In academic writing, they struggled with terminology, word choice, and sentence construction.

The studies collectively suggest several common strategies for improving international students' academic adaptation in relation to language proficiency. First, engaging in language courses and writing workshops is widely recommended to enhance academic writing and

communication skills (Ma & Vijavartnam, 2020). Second, peer interaction and social engagement play a crucial role, as building relationships with both international and local students helps reduce language anxiety and improve practical communication (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). Third, institutional and academic support services, such as mentoring programs, classroom participation activities, and academic resource centers, are essential for easing adaptation challenges (Lashari et al., 2023). Fourth, self-directed learning and motivation, including self-study, seeking external help, and using translation tools, are encouraged to foster language development (Wang, Muthukrishnan, & Mary, 2020). Lastly, cultural adaptation activities, such as participation in social and cultural exchange events, help students integrate into their new academic environment while improving their language proficiency (Rohman, Ashari, & Johari, 2024). These strategies highlight a holistic approach that combines formal education, peer and institutional support, and self-driven efforts to enhance international students' academic experiences.

**Table 3: Summary of Topics and Findings in Selected Articles**

References	Focus Topics	Main Findings
Singh (2020)	Academic Resilience	Insufficient English language proficiency significantly impacts international students' academic adaptation in Malaysia.
Wang, Muthukrishnan, and Mary (2020)	Intercultural Sensitivity, Knowledge Sharing	Academic adaptation was indirectly related to their language skills.
Ma and Vijayaratnam (2020)	English Learning	Interactive and communicative classroom activities would help them improve their English-speaking skills for both academic and practical purposes.
Taly and Paramasivam (2020)	Academic Speaking, Speaking Anxiety	Support from lecturers and peer interactions can help students manage their anxiety and improve their academic performance.
Li, Qian, and Rao (2021)	Intercultural Adaptation	Language ability directly affects international students' academic adaptation and social interaction skills.
Nachatar Singh and Jack (2022)	Academic Success, Adjustment, Linguaculture	Language and cultural differences significantly influenced the academic adaptation among international graduate students in academic writing, classroom interactions, and group collaborations.
Lashari, Awang-Hashim, Lashari, and Kaur (2023)	Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Psychological Adjustment, English Language Proficiency	English language proficiency significantly predicts the academic, social, and psychological adaptation of international students.



Rohman, Ashari, and Johari (2024)	Cultural Adaptation	The key factors influencing academic adaptation are language proficiency, the mentor-student relationship, differences in teaching methods, academic support, and emotional support.
Bi and Ahmad (2024)	Academic Adaptation	English language barriers hinder both academic success and social integration.

Source: Summarized from Selected Articles

### **Theories**

In the above article, seven theories were used, namely Acculturation Theory (Bi & Ahmad, 2024), Intercultural Sensitivity Theory (Wang et al., 2020), Language Anxiety Theory (Taly et al., 2020), Berry's Cultural Adaptation Theory ((Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Rohman et al., 2024), Culture Learning Theory, Stress and Coping Theory (Lashari et al., 2023), and Integrative Theory of Communication (Bi & Ahmad, 2024).

As one of the most widely used theories, acculturation theory is commonly applied to explain the cultural adjustment of international students (Bi & Ahmad, 2024). Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001) was used to understand behavioural and psychological adaptation (Bi & Ahmad, 2024). Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) was applied to assess students' strategies for managing academic and social stress (Lashari et al., 2023). These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and adaptation processes of international students in Malaysia.

Based on Berry's (1997) acculturation model, Acculturation Theory explains how international students adapt to new cultural environments through four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 1997). It has been widely used to analyze cultural stress, adaptation challenges, and coping strategies among Chinese students in Malaysia (Bi & Ahmad, 2024).

Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation model describes adaptation as a dynamic and self-regulating process in which individuals adjust their behaviours and identities in response to a new cultural environment. It has been used to examine how Chinese postgraduate students navigate academic and social changes in Malaysia (Bi & Ahmad, 2024).

Stress and Coping Theory explores the psychological struggles of international students and their coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research has shown that acculturative stress, social support, and language proficiency are key mediators in the academic and psychological adjustment of international students in Malaysia (Lashari et al., 2023).

Risager's (2006, 2020) linguaculture concept explains how language and culture are intertwined in international students' academic experiences. This theory has been used to explore language barriers and cultural differences in Malaysian universities (Singh & Jack, 2022).

### **Research Method**

Of the nine research papers, six articles adopted qualitative research methods (Singh, 2020; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Rohman et al., 2024; Ma & Vijayarathnam, 2020) while three used quantitative study methods (Lashari et al., 2023;

Wang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). In the qualitative research paper, the investigators used semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (Singh, 2020; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Rohman et al., 2024; Ma & Vijayarathnam, 2020). In quantitative research papers, scholars have selected self-administered questionnaires and interviews as the research methods (Lashari et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). These studies all selected cross-sectional surveys to collect data at a certain time. For analytical methods, the qualitative study used Thematic Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Thematic Analysis (Singh, 2020; Nachatar & Jack, 2022; Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Rohman et al., 2024; Ma & Vijayarathnam, 2020). One quantitative research paper employed Path Analysis for data analysis, while two selected SPSS as the analysis software. Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation, and Cross-Tabulation Analysis are among the important statistical methods (Lashari et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

Due to the use of standardized numerical data in quantitative studies, it is possible to directly compare the indicators used in studies (e.g., GPA and scores on language tests) to draw more consistent conclusions. In contrast, qualitative research methods lack standardization. Different studies may employ varying interview questions and analytical frameworks, making it challenging to compare results across studies. Therefore, using quantitative research methods to study issues related to academic adaptation offers greater comparability.

Regarding the reliability of the research, quantitative studies employ a unified data collection method (such as questionnaires). If the methodology is well designed, the study is reproducible, and the conclusions are more stable. In contrast, qualitative research relies on the researcher's interpretation, and different researchers may have varying interpretations, resulting in lower reliability.

**Table 4: Summary of Research Methods in Selected Articles**

Research Design	Research Method	Analytic Method	References	Number of Articles
Qualitative Research Approach	Semi-Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis	Singh (2020)	6
			Nachatar Singh and Jack (2022)	
	In-Depth Interviews	Discourse Analysis	Bi and Ahmad (2024)	
		Thematic Analysis	Taly and Paramasivam (2020)	
Quantitative Research Approach	Focus Group Discussions	Not Listed	Rohman, Ashari, and Johari (2024)	3
		Path Analysis	Ma and Vijayaratnam (2020)	
	Self-Administered Questionnaire	Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation	Lashari, Awang-Hashim, Lashari, and Kaur (2023)	
		Descriptive Statistics, Cross-Tabulation Analysis	Wang, Muthukrishnan, and Mary (2020)	
	Questionnaire Surveys and Interviews		Li, Qian, and Rao (2021)	

Source: Summarized from Selected Articles

### **Conclusion**

This literature review involved articles related to the academic adaptation of international students published from 2020 to 2025, so there might be some partial opinions in the conclusion of this study. Nevertheless, the existing research gap and the future research direction could be explored to fulfil these limitations.

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country, and has not received enough attention in relation to its unique linguistic environment and cultural context. Most existing research has focused on learners in Western settings, and it remains uncertain how these findings can be applied to the multilingual and multicultural social context in Malaysia. Generally speaking, the research on the academic adaptation of international students and related issues has always been closely related to the trend of international students studying abroad. According to existing academic research, Western scholars pay more attention to the academic adaptation of international students. Due to the longer history of outbound study in Western countries—particularly since the mid-20th century—research on the academic, social, and psychological adaptation of international students has received considerable attention in those regions. In contrast, both China and Malaysia possess unique cultural characteristics, offering valuable perspectives and insights for academic research into the adaptation processes of international students in non-Western contexts. However, existing research on Chinese students studying in Malaysia is scarce and lacks a deeper theoretical basis.

In terms of sampling, most studies were conducted in public universities in Malaysia, which may be related to the advantages of public universities in attracting international students. However, the data sample population of most studies is limited to one to five universities, and the sample size is small, lacking a comparison of the language ability and academic adaptability of Chinese students from different universities. This limitation makes it difficult to reflect the overall situation of the academic adaptability of Chinese students in Malaysia. In the study subjects, only two studies included lecturers, academic staff, and professionals. Future studies could introduce more types of samples to gain a richer perspective on the academic adaptation of international students.

Malaysia is a non-Anglophone country, but most international students in Malaysia need to use English as their primary language of instruction, which is one of the main differences between international students in Malaysia and those in other English-speaking countries. However, the early research on academic adaptation did not pay special attention to the challenges brought by this unique language and cultural environment. Language proficiency was mentioned as one of the key factors influencing academic adaptation. The topic of study ranged from Academic Resilience and Intercultural Sensitivity to English Learning, gradually shifting to Intercultural Adaptation, Academic Success, and Academic Adjustment. Eventually, studies focused on Academic Adaptation and language proficiency emerged. Studies focusing on the relationship between language proficiency and academic adaptation among Chinese international students studying in Malaysia are still rare.

The most widely used theories in these studies are acculturation theory, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, and Stress and Coping Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and adaptation processes of international students in Malaysia. Future research can be based on these theories, or other theories can be introduced to obtain novel research perspectives.

In terms of the research methodologies used in the current study, cross-sectional survey studies phenomena, behaviours, attitudes, opinions, or characteristics in the population by collecting data at a specific point in time. Often, this approach involves investigating a different group of individuals or groups, and it does not focus on the changes in these individuals over time during the data collection process. The advantage of a cross-sectional survey is the time savings and the cost and effort of long-term tracking. The investigators were able to analyze the differences between the different groups at the same time point. However, since the data were collected at the same time point, the cross-sectional survey only identified the correlations between the variables. Moreover, due to the limited representativeness of the data, the research results may be influenced by the social, economic, and political environment as well as other factors at that time, leading to poor extrapolation of the conclusions. Alternatively, because cross-sectional surveys do not function to track changes in the data, they cannot reveal long-term trends or individual changes over time. Overall, the cross-sectional survey mainly has limitations in analyzing the changing trends. The introduction of longitudinal studies will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the changes in international students' academic adaptability, verify the effectiveness of coping strategies employed by international students and higher education organizations, and help address this research gap in the future.

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