

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

SERVICE DESIGN FOR THE INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT (PGT) STUDENTS IN THE UK.

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**KEYWORDS | CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION,
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL CHALLENGES, SERVICE DESIGN**

ABSTRACT | Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students experience various psychological and physical challenges during their intercultural adaptation process in the UK. Existing studies have proposed some theoretical or conceptual intervention guidelines to support international students' intercultural adaptation. However, very little research has been considered to help service providers, i.e., Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), to effectively apply the theoretical guidance in their practical service design regarding Chinese PGT students' intercultural adaptation experience in the UK. Service design research also rarely explores the design context of intercultural adaptation. This study aims to explore the comprehensive adaptation experiences of Chinese PGT students, identify their difficulties and needs, and then propose practical service design implications for HEIs. Semi-structured interviews with 24 Chinese PGT students were used to explore in detail their adaptation experiences and service needs from psychological, socio-cultural, and academic perspectives. The results show that Chinese PGT students experienced psychological challenges throughout their adaptation process, particularly in the first few weeks in the UK. These were related to unfamiliarity with the new environment, poor communication experiences, and confusion with academic values or systems (especially in the first academic term). Some implications for service design within HEIs were then developed, such as pre-departure education, more support services in the first few weeks, extension language support services, and more explanation and guidance on the academic values of the host country. This study provides insights for HEIs in supporting Chinese PGT students' adaptation experience and reducing their psychological stress. As the service design approach is at the core of this research, the main knowledge contribution will be in the field of service design.

1. Introduction

Research Background

Intercultural adaptation can be defined as individuals changing their original cultural behaviors to facilitate effective communication in cross-cultural interactions (Cai & Rodriguez, 1997). International students often face challenges when they adapt to an unfamiliar cultural environment due to cultural differences (Dodd, 1998). They may experience prejudice and discrimination, as well as homesickness, disappointment, confusion, and loneliness (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). This psychological stress causes people to have difficulties learning a new culture, solving problems, and making decisions (Xia, 2009), which may affect international students' social integration and academic performance and increase mental health problems.

Some research has seen higher education institutions (HEIs) as the service providers responsible for supporting students' problems and needs (e.g., Gill, 2007; Gu & Maley, 2008; Wang et al., 2012). As HEIs rely on international student enrolments to increase their income (Marshall, 2005), and international students come to the UK motivated by the pursuit of an academic degree; this study agrees that HEIs should be seen as service providers who should support international students' adaptation experience, ensure their wellbeing and help them achieve their academic goals.

Among all international students in the UK, Chinese students are the largest group, not only diversifying campuses but also contributing to academic research in HEIs (UKCOSA 2004). Compared with other international students, Chinese students often have poorer intercultural adaptation experiences, such as bad mental health in general (Leong, 2015). Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students face more significant challenges due to their limited study (adaptation) time of one year. Therefore, Chinese international PGT students are the focus of this study.

Intercultural Adaptation

Current studies on Chinese international students' intercultural adaptation in the UK largely focus on students' adaptation processes and influencing factors and then suggest intervention guidelines. For example, Lu (1990) found that Chinese international students often felt homesick as they adapted to the UK academic environment. Gill (2007) argued that the adaptation process of Chinese students in the UK is a learning process and suggested that HEIs should provide them with a facilitative, supportive, inclusive, and culturally interactive environment. Gu and Maley (2008) and Ye and Edwards (2015) suggested that teachers' abilities, such as empathy and sympathy, can be helpful to Chinese students' intercultural adaptation. Zhou and Todman (2008) suggest that 'matching pedagogical expectations' plays a crucial role in Chinese students' intercultural adaptation. An example of pedagogical expectation is that HEIs strongly encourage their students to be independent and become critical thinkers, whereas Chinese universities usually require their students to accept authority (Zhou et al., 2011).

The proposed intervention guidelines, however, are mainly theoretical or conceptual, and few consider the service provider's perspectives to propose practical suggestions based on everyday practices regarding Chinese international students. Furthermore, the guidelines also tend to emphasise the achievement of students' academic adaptation and pay less attention to students' psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, which is important for student's mental health and personal development in the long term.

Service Design

Service design is a practical approach to creating and improving what organisations offer, following the core design activities of research, ideation, prototyping, and implementation to develop experiences that meet the needs of the organisation, the customer, and other stakeholders (Stickdorn, 2018). This means that the interests of both HEIs and Chinese PGT students could be taken into consideration. The principle of

service design also implies the need to focus on students' complete needs rather than superficial symptoms (Stickdorn, 2018).

However, many service designs are complicated because service providers and service recipients may have different views of service concepts (Goldstein et al., 2002), for example, international students may view the concept of services they expect as the whole experience of being supported during their adaptation journey, rather than some specific services (e.g., language or wellbeing support). Although the principles of service design show potential benefits in intercultural adaptation, current service design research is, to my knowledge, rarely explored in this context. Service design is also a relatively new concept to the HEIs (Baranova et al., 2011).

Research Objective

This study aims to provide insights for HEIs to design better services to support the adaptation experience of Chinese PGT students. As the first phase of a larger project, this study focuses on exploring the adaptation experience of Chinese PGT students, identifying their psychological and physical difficulties and needs, and then proposing initial service design implications for HEIs.

2. Research Methodology

The study used semi-structured interviews because it allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) during their adaptation journey. In the data analysis stage, thematic analysis was used as it can highlight the common themes in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which could help to better understand the common adaptation experience of Chinese PGT students in the UK. The data was collected between November 2022 and February 2023.

The final sample consisted of twenty-four Chinese PGT students in the UK: fifteen females and nine males. All participants were Chinese PGT students who came from mainland China, used Chinese as their primary language, and experienced the host culture environment in the UK. Ten participants stayed in the UK for 1-3 months, four participants stayed for 4-6 months and then stayed for over six months. Over half of the participants studied in England (n=18), a quarter in Scotland (n=5), and the rest in Wales (n=1).

The interview questions were created using the J-curve model and three types of sojourner adaptation (psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation). The J-curve model, which was suggested by Collins (2021), describes the adaptation process as three stages: the 'cultural challenges' stage, the 'adjustment' stage, and the 'mastery' stage. The J-curve model is based on short-term adaptation studies and focuses primarily on the international students' adaptation process, which is the most applicable to this study. Two fundamental types of sojourner adaptation are identified by Ward and colleagues: psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward, 1996). In addition, some researchers who focus on the student's academic adaptation found that psychological mood could change with the academic calendar during students' adaptation process (Golden, 1973; Selby & Woods, 1966). Therefore, three types of sojourner adaptation (psychological, socio-cultural, and academic) were used to investigate students' comprehensive adaptation experiences from multiple perspectives.

3. Summary and Discussion of Findings

The results of the Chinese PGT students' adaptation experiences are presented in the following categories: psychological challenges throughout the adaptation process, new cultural environment and communication difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the host country's academic values. Based on the results, four main implications in service design for intercultural adaptation are suggested (see Table 1).

3.1 Chinese PGT Students' Adaptation Experience in the UK

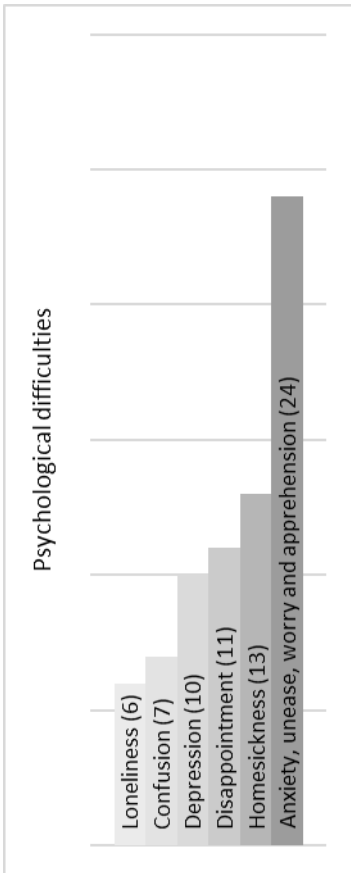
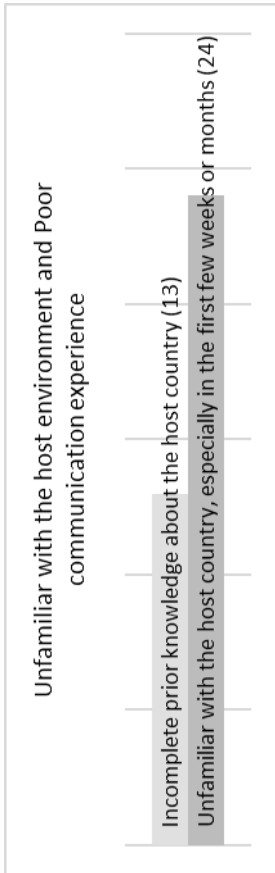
Psychological challenges throughout the adaptation process

Participants reported experiencing a mixture of positive and negative emotions before arriving in the host country. After arriving in the host country, participants' positive emotions (e.g., excitement and curiosity) were concentrated in the first few weeks in the host country, mainly related to a new cultural environment. However, some negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, worry, disappointment, and depression) also seemed to be mentioned more often in the first few months and, especially, in the first one to three weeks. This was because they were in an unfamiliar cultural environment with academic pressures and a lack of social support. When participants approached graduation, they began to feel anxiety and stress about finding future career or study opportunities because of concerns about available visas, unfamiliar environments, or lack of a helpful social network.

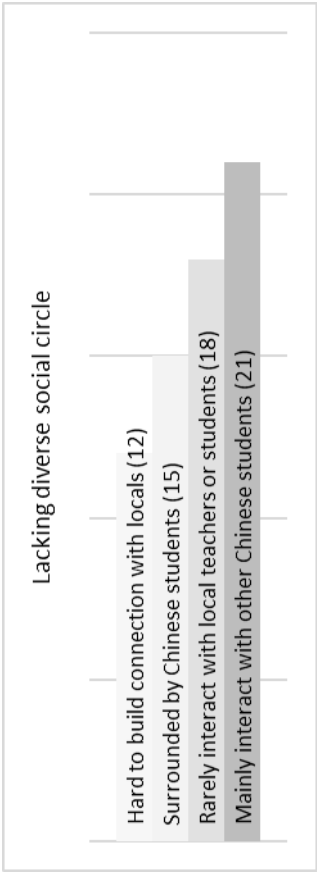
New cultural environment and communication difficulties

Most participants did not have a comprehensive understanding of the host country before arriving and even had certain prejudices and stereotypes. After arriving in the host country, they found that they were not familiar with the environment, especially the local service system (e.g., banks and General Practitioners (GPs)), which caused a lot of inconveniences and increased their psychological stress. Lack of communication skills and opportunities appeared to be a significant challenge. Most participants preferred to interact within their own culture and rarely communicated with people from other cultures. They felt uncertain about communicating in English, had difficulty expressing themselves clearly, and were confused when interacting with their teachers or other locals. Some participants also mentioned that they were surrounded by Chinese students and rarely had the opportunity to interact with people from other ethnic backgrounds.

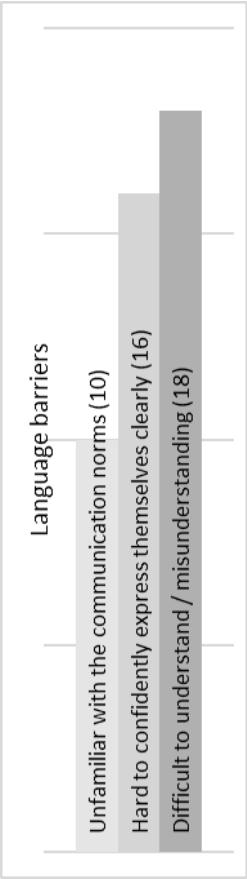
Table 1. The results of Chinese PGT students' adaptation experiences and the implications for service design.

Three types of adaptation	Chinese PGT students' adaptation experience in the UK (number of participants)	Implications in service design														
Psychological challenges throughout the adaptation process, especially in the first few weeks (psychological adaptation)	Psychological difficulties <table><tr><th>Psychological difficulties</th><th>Number of participants</th></tr><tr><td>Loneliness</td><td>6</td></tr><tr><td>Confusion</td><td>7</td></tr><tr><td>Depression</td><td>10</td></tr><tr><td>Disappointment</td><td>11</td></tr><tr><td>Homesickness</td><td>13</td></tr><tr><td>Anxiety, unease, worry and apprehension</td><td>24</td></tr></table>	Psychological difficulties	Number of participants	Loneliness	6	Confusion	7	Depression	10	Disappointment	11	Homesickness	13	Anxiety, unease, worry and apprehension	24	More support for socio-cultural and academic adaptation experience (psychological difficulties were highly relevant to their socio-cultural and academic adaptation experiences)
Psychological difficulties	Number of participants															
Loneliness	6															
Confusion	7															
Depression	10															
Disappointment	11															
Homesickness	13															
Anxiety, unease, worry and apprehension	24															
New cultural environment and communication difficulties (socio-cultural adaptation)	Unfamiliar with the host environment and Poor communication experience <table><tr><th>Communication difficulties</th><th>Number of participants</th></tr><tr><td>Incomplete prior knowledge about the host country</td><td>13</td></tr><tr><td>Unfamiliar with the host country, especially in the first few weeks or months</td><td>24</td></tr></table>	Communication difficulties	Number of participants	Incomplete prior knowledge about the host country	13	Unfamiliar with the host country, especially in the first few weeks or months	24	Pre-departure education More support services in the first few weeks								
Communication difficulties	Number of participants															
Incomplete prior knowledge about the host country	13															
Unfamiliar with the host country, especially in the first few weeks or months	24															

(A hidden potential crisis has also been identified – an over-representation of Chinese students in certain subjects in some schools)

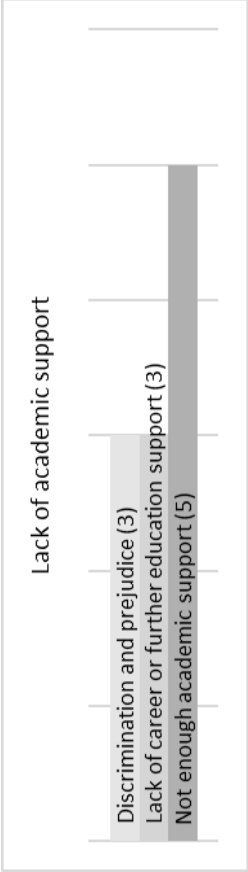
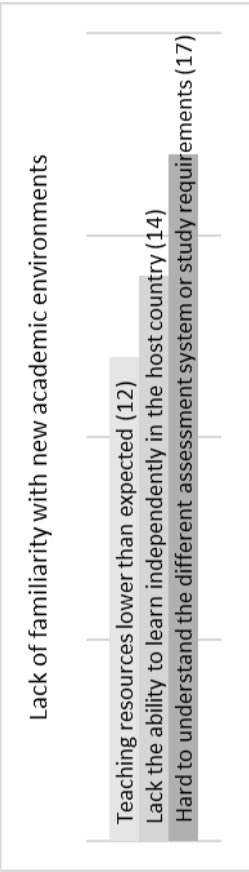


Expand language support services



Unfamiliarity with the host academic values (academic adaptation)

More explanations and guidance on the host academic values



Unfamiliarity with the host academic values

Participants usually felt unfamiliar with and confused by the new academic environment. The academic requirements and assessments were the most mentioned. Some participants said that they did not understand teachers' expectations or how to achieve higher scores. Combined with their communication difficulties, it is usually difficult for them to know how to adapt to the new academic environment and adjust their study methods until they receive formal written feedback after the first academic term. Some participants also mentioned that independent learning was a challenge because their home country's education system was more teacher-centered. Therefore, many participants were dissatisfied that teachers did not actively impart more knowledge, did not provide enough guidance and support, and required them to search for information and organise their own study time.

3.2 Implications in Service Design for Intercultural Adaptation

Pre-departure education

Improving knowledge about the host country in the pre-departure stage may be a viable solution to reduce Chinese students' negative emotions and difficulties caused by unfamiliarity with the host culture, as it can reduce Chinese PGT students' prejudices, stereotypes, and culture shock. This could help Chinese students establish realistic service expectations, which is a key factor influencing their satisfaction with service quality (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

More support services in the first few weeks

It might be useful to provide more services to help Chinese PGT students understand the local service system in their early adaptation period, such as more guidance on registering with a GP and applying for a bank card. Although the school provided relevant guidance services, Chinese students continued to find it difficult to access these local service systems.

Participants experienced high negative emotions in the first three months, according to the J-curve model (Collins et al., 2021). However, this study identified that participants felt particularly high negative emotions in the first few weeks, which provides a more specific time for when Chinese PGT students need the most support.

Expand language support services

Chinese students' low confidence in expressing themselves in English and uncertainty about the local etiquette required the most attention, especially in academic situations. For example, in the UK educational environment, the power distance between teachers and students was not as pronounced as in Chinese culture, and positive encouragement and recognition from teachers helped Chinese students to express their ideas and interact confidently with teachers, but some of the indirect 'polite' terms used in the local culture can be confusing for Chinese students. As one participant said: "Teachers were so polite. I thought that putting it in the Chinese context means that I don't need to pay much attention to the exam... I didn't expect that I would fail the final exam". Therefore, language support could also be extended to teach cultural language norms.

A hidden potential crisis has also been identified. Chinese students have been the largest international student group in the UK since 2003 (Gu, 2011), leading to an over-representation of Chinese students in certain subjects in some schools. This 'un-diverse' environment meant that students lacked opportunities for English language communication and multicultural interaction, which could lead to their dissatisfaction and poor adaptation experiences. This issue was rarely mentioned in the current research, but it deserves attention as the feedback from these Chinese students may affect the reputation of the HEIs.

More explanations and guidance on the host academic values

Most of the Chinese students had never experienced alternative teaching and learning styles before, which led them to have misunderstandings and extra pressure (Gu & Maley, 2008), especially in their first academic term. At the same time, the host academic system was more inclined to allow students to learn and explore independently, which leads to students' lack of guidance and support in this regard and exacerbates their difficulty in adapting to the local academic life. Without guidance, it was also difficult for Chinese students to understand the benefits of the host academic values, resulting in some Chinese PGT students interpreting 'self-directed learning' as 'low-quality teaching' and 'lack of academic support.' Therefore, providing Chinese PGT students with more guidance on host academic values in the first term may help them to adapt more effectively to local academic life and better achieve their academic goals.

4. Conclusion

Current research lacks practical service design suggestions for HEIs, and little research explores service design in the context of intercultural adaptation. The findings of this study provide insights for HEIs to better design their services to support and facilitate the intercultural adaptation process and reduce psychological stress, especially for Chinese PGT students. This study, as part of a larger project, explored the research step of service design in the context of intercultural adaptation. The next step will be further research into service provider perspectives, idea and prototype development, and testing, which could lead to more detailed contributions to the field of service design for intercultural adaptation.

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