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Journal of Educational Theory and Management

https://ojs.s-p.sg/index.php/jetm

The Association between Self-motivation and Academic Achievement at the Undergraduate Level in the United Kingdom for Chinese Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: 6 June 2025
Accepted: 13 June 2025
Published Online: 30 June 2025

Keywords:
Self-motivation
Self-Determination Theory
Self-efficacy
Chinese International students

ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship between self-motivation and academic achievement among Chinese undergraduate students studying in the UK. Also, it addresses the unique transition challenges from structured educational systems in China to autonomous British universities. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using an online survey completed and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate a significant positive link between self-motivation levels and GPA. Students frequently utilised self-regulatory strategies, including goal-setting, effective time management, and self-rewarding, to enhance academic autonomy. The study highlights the dynamic interplay between internal motivation and external sociocultural pressures. It also reflects the complexity of motivation in intercultural settings. The research contributes insights into Self-Determination Theory, Growth Mindset, and Self-Efficacy. Practical recommendations include structured mentoring and intercultural competence training to support student transitions.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the globalisation of higher education has let to a significant rise in international student mobility. Among these, Chinese undergraduate students represent one large of groups studying in the United Kingdom. Usually, they are attracted by the academic prestige of UK universities and opportunities fro personal growth (Yamada, 2021). However, transitioning from Chinese teacher-led education system to the self-directed in British education system presents a unique challenges (Liu, 2023). One major challenge is the growing need for self-motivation. According to Artino and Stephens (2009), the students must take greater focus on their learning. This shifts is due to the lack of instructor supervisions and external pressures.

Self-motivation refers to the internal motivation. As it could enable individuals to pursue goals without relying on external rewards or supervision (Romas and Sharma, 2017). In academic contexts, it plays a key role in influencing performance outcomes, such as coursework results, degree classification, and GPA (Amrai et al., 2011). There is limited researches on how self-motivation impacts on academic success among Chinese undergraduates studying in the UK. Most existing studies focus on younger learners. They do not consider the cultural and educational transitions experienced by international students.

This study addresses the gap by investigating the relationship between self-motivation and academic achievement among Chinese undergraduate students in UK universities. It explores the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence motivation. Also, it investigates how students adapt their strategies to academic challenges in a new

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 DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v9i2.27217

cultural context. The research is both academically and personally motivated. As a Chinese student who has experienced this transition, the researcher has faced difficulties in adjusting to autonomous learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1: Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a comprehensive framework for understanding student motivation. It is developed by Ryan and Deci (2000a; 2020) , emphasising the quality rather than the quantity of motivation. This comprehensive framework also argues that individuals are more likely to engage in learning meaningfully and persistently. In addition, it contains three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Firstly, Autonomy refers to feeling in control of one's actions. Then, competence involves feeling capable and effective. Finally, relatedness reflects the sense of connection to others such as peers or instructors. When these needs are supported in an academic setting, students tend to experience higher engagement, improved performance, and deeper learning (Guay, 2021).

A central distinction in SDT is between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation includes both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the engagement in activities that align with personal values and extrinsic motivation are defined as the driven motivation by interest or enjoyment. Conversely, controlled motivation refers to the rewards or external pressure (Howard et al., 2021) . Research shows that autonomous motivation students are more likely to exhibit self-regulation, persistence, and academic success. Controlled motivation may yield short-term compliance, but often leads to anxiety and disengagement over time.

An important sub-theory within SDT is Organismic Integration Theory (OIT). It explains how externally regulated behaviours can gradually become internalised and integrated into the self. For example, a student who initially studies to gain parental approval may begin to value academic success personally over time. This internalisation process transforms extrinsic motivation into a more autonomous motivation. This process also often produces the outcomes similar to those driven by intrinsic interest (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

This process is especially relevant for Chinese students. Many Chinese students begin their academic journey strongly influenced by family expectations, cultural values, and social comparison. While these sources reflect controlled motivation, they can become internalised and reinterpreted as personal goals if students find meaning in their learning (Liu et al., 2019). Thus, even extrinsic motivators can support academic success. Especially, when there is a supportive environment that respects student autonomous.

Furthermore, cultural context plays an essential role in SDT's application. In collectivist societies like in China, motivation is often connected with family duty and social roles. Wondimu and Marjon (2006) argue that external motivations are not necessarily negatively influenced. Especially,when students reinterpret them in ways that satisfy autonomy and competence. Therefore, SDT remains a flexible and culturally sensitive framework. It also aims to explore how motivation develops and operates across diverse educational environments.

2.2 Self-Efficacy

The academic motivation and performance. Unlike broader concepts of motivation, self-efficacy specifically refers to a student's belief in their ability to successfully carry out academic tasks. In university contexts, self-efficacy affects how students approach challenges, regulate effort, and persist through academic demands (Artino, 2012). It is not a measure of actual ability, but of perceived competence, which heavily influences behaviour and outcomes.

Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious but attainable goals, initiate tasks earlier, and maintain effort when faced with setbacks. Zimmerman (2000) argued that self-efficacy plays a central role in self-regulated learning, encouraging better time management, goal setting, and reduced procrastination. This is particularly relevant in UK higher education. The students are expected to manage their own learning with less external control than in many other systems, such as China's exam-driven model.

Empirical research confirms the predictive power of self-efficacy. Komarraju and Nadler (2013) found that students with strong academic self-efficacy were more likely to manage their study habits effectively and persist through difficulties. Choi (2005) found that self-efficacy are more tied to specific tasks, such as a particular essay or module. It was more influential than general confidence. Also, it underlines the importance of the specific beliefs in academic performance.

Self-efficacy also impacts emotional regulation. Students who feel confident in their academic capabilities are more resilient under pressure. In addition, they may experience less anxiety and have more understanding about the pressure releasing during assessments and presentations (Pajares and Schunk, 2000). In contrast, those with low self-efficacy are more susceptible to stress. Also, they

DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v9i2.27217

often avoid difficult tasks or disengaging altogether (Barrows, Dunn and Lloyd, 2013).

Self-efficacy can be particularly important in adapting to an unfamiliar academic culture. Many students must shift from memorisation-based learning to independent, critical thinking. Developing self-efficacy allows them to face these challenges with greater confidence and motivation. In this way, self-efficacy aligns closely with the SDT concept of competence. As both emphasise students' beliefs in their own capabilities as a driver of academic engagement and success.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Overview of Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods design. It combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both statistical insights Also, it could gain a deeper contextual understanding of self-motivation among Chinese undergraduate students in UK universities. The mixed-methods approach was chosen due to the multidimensional nature of motivation. They involves both measurable outcomes, such as academic performance and complex personal experiences about the perception of the motivation. By integrating survey data with personal narratives, this approach allows for triangulation, enhances reliability. In addition, it provides a richer interpretation of how students' motivation functions and evolves in an intercultural educational context.

3.2 Participants

The study involved two groups of participants. The quantitative survey was completed by 35 Chinese undergraduate students currently enrolled in UK universities. Participants were recruited via student societies, WeChat groups, and academic mailing lists. It targets on those who self-identified as Chinese nationals and were enrolled full-time in undergraduate programs. This research aims to include students across different academic levels. Additionally, it included different undergraduate year groups to ensure a variation in academic experience.

Among the survey participants, three participants volunteered to take part in semi-structured interviews. These students were selected to represent different academic performance levels and motivational approaches based on their survey responses.

This research applied a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to collecting data from the participants for the survey. This sampling strategy ensured that the interview data could meaningfully expand on the broader survey trends. While, it also capturing distinct personal strategies and challenges.

3.3 Data collection

Quantitative data were collected through a self-designed online survey hosted on Qualtrics. The survey comprised a combination of closed-ended and scaled questions. It designed to measure students' self-reported GPA, motivational tendencies (e.g., intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation), common study strategies, and perceptions of academic autonomy and pressure. Likert-scale questions are measured agreement with statements related to goal-setting, fear of failure, reward systems, and internal drive. Additional open-ended prompts allowed participants to briefly explain their strategies or motivations with initial qualitative insights.

The qualitative phase involved the semi-structured interviews. It conducted via Zoom, each interview lasts approximately 30 minutes. The interview was designed to explore themes emerging from the survey in greater depth. Firstly, it aims to find how participants understood and defined motivation. Then, the interview will focus on how their motivation changed after entering UK higher education. Finally, find the sources of pressure or inspiration they experienced. Open-ended questions encouraged reflection on both emotional and strategic dimensions of learning.

3.4 Data Analysis

Survey responses were exported from the Qualtrics to the Excel and analysed using SPSS. Basic descriptive statistics were calculated. It aims to summarise motivational profiles and GPA distributions. Correlation analysis was used to identify patterns between motivation types (e.g., intrinsic, goal-based, externally driven) and academic performance, particularly focusing on self-reported final or predicted grades.

Interview data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. Initial coding was performed line-by-line to identify recurring patterns, which were then grouped into broader themes related to self-determination and self-efficacy, such as goal orientation, self-regulation, pressure from external expectations, and shifts in perceived autonomy.

4. Finding

4. Overview of Findings

This study investigated the relationship between self-motivation and academic achievement. It also seeks to the key factors shaping student motivation. Survey results from 35 Chinese undergraduate students in the UK revealed a clear trend: higher levels of self-motivation

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were associated with better academic performance.

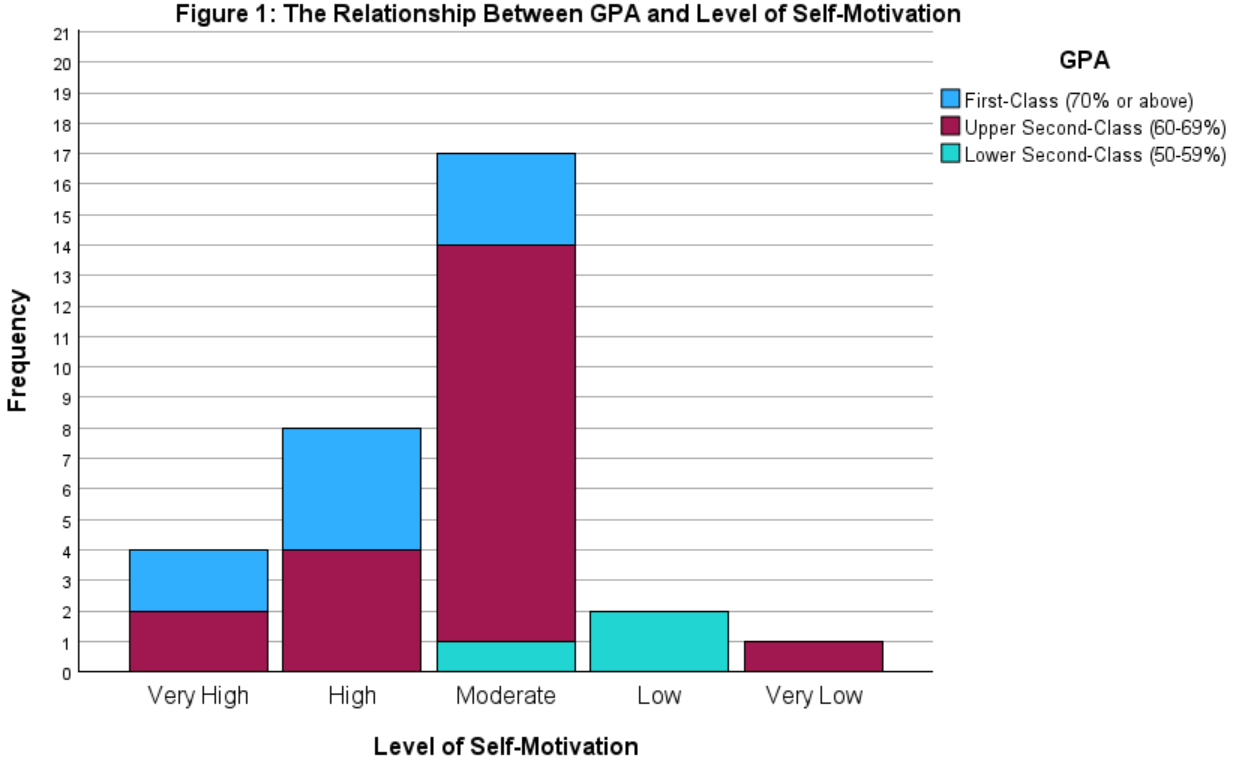
4.2 Quantitative Findings

4.2.1 Relationship Between Self-Motivation and Academic Achievement

This study investigated the relationship between self-motivation and academic achievement. It also seeks to the key factors shaping student motivation. Survey results from 35 Chinese undergraduate students in the UK revealed a clear trend: higher levels of self-motivation were associated with better academic performance.

Among the 17 students who rated their motivation as "Moderate," most (14) achieved Upper Second-Class (2:1) degrees and only few attaining First-Class results. In contrast, participants with "High" (8 students) or "Very High" (5 students) motivation showed stronger outcomes. There are only 5 out of these 13 achieved First-Class results. While the majority of the rest achieved 2:1. No First-Class results were reported among students with "Low" or "Very Low" motivation, who generally performed at a 2:2 level or lower. While the sample is small, these patterns indicate a positive relationship between motivation and GPA.

Figure 1: The Relationship Between GPA and Level of Self-Motivation



4.2.2 Key Factors Influencing Self-Motivation

The most common motivation factor was goal-setting, chosen by 23 students. This was followed by self-rewarding (19), fear of failure (17), peer competition (11), and external validation (9). These results show a combination of autonomous motivation (like personal goals) and controlled motivation (such as fear or comparison). This pattern reflects Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000a). Some external motivators may be internalised over time such as the rewards or family pressure. This indicates that they become part of the student's own regulation and motivation. This process also connects to Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997). Students who believe in their ability to succeed are more likely to set goals and keep trying.

In summary, the data support the view that self-motivation. Especially when internalised is linked to academic success, though students often draw from both internal and external motivational sources.

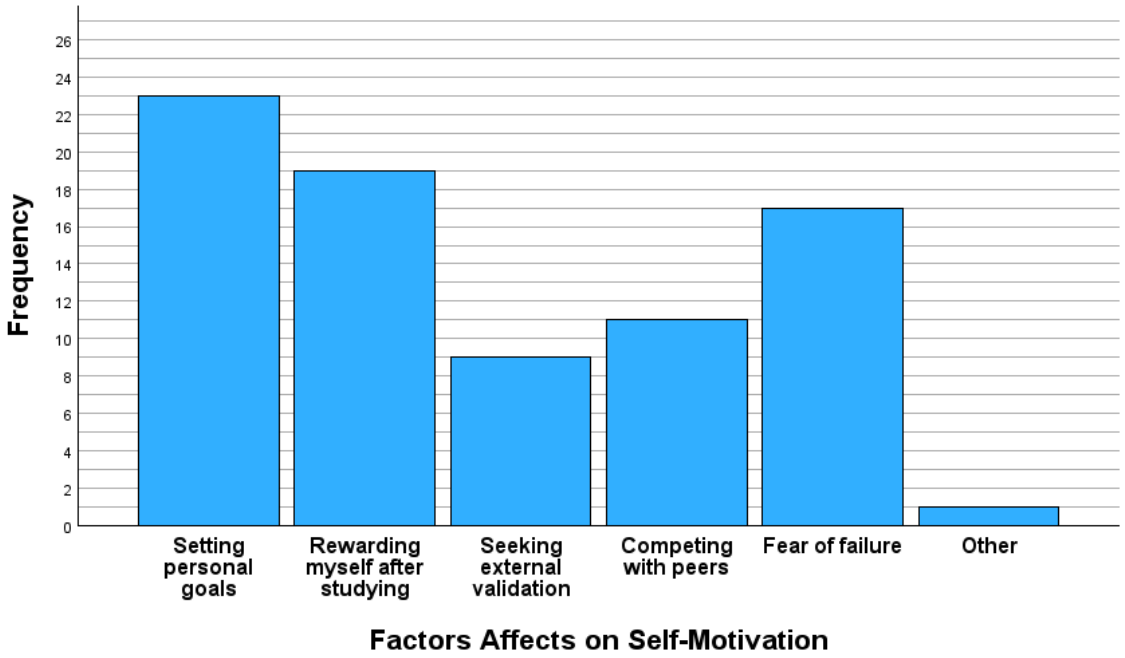
4.3 Qualitative Finds

4.3.1 Theme 1: Balancing Internal Drive and External Pressure

All three participants expressed that their academic motivation was influenced by both internal goals and external expectations in the interview.

DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v9i2.27217

Figure 2: Frequency of Factors Affects on Self-Motivation



Student A expressed a strong internal goals:

"I feel responsible about my study and it's my duty to complete every assessment and graduate and work."

Similarly, Student B explained that intellectual curiosity was a major driver:

"My primary motivation is driven by a desire to understand different educational theories… I felt highly self-motivated when conducting research for my dissertation."

These reflections align with autonomous motivation in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000a), where students act out of internal values or interest.

However, external influences were also significant.

Student C noted,

"I don't really feel motivated until the deadline comes closer… if there's no deadline, I probably wouldn't start it."

This illustrates controlled motivation, such as the pressure and obligation leads the action. Peer competition and family expectations motivate the external regulation.

Student A said,

"I compare myself to others, it motivates me to be better,"

While Student B admitted,

"My family expects me to succeed. It motivates me, but I also feel anxious."

These insights demonstrates how Chinese students often balance intrinsic goals with extrinsic demands. When students feel internally driven. However, the cultural expectations related to success, family expectation, and social comparison continue to shape behaviour. This blend of motivational sources reflects what Wondimu and Marjon (2006) describe in collectivist contexts. It indicates that external motivators can be internalised and becoming part of the student's own sense of responsibility and identity.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Strategies for Self-Regulation and Academic Adaptation

Students also described a range of strategies used to manage motivation and academic pressure. All three participants reported breaking large tasks into smaller parts and organising their study routines.

Student A said,

"I usually break the task down… like I'll say today I do the reading, tomorrow I write a draft, and the day after I finish it."

Student C echoed this with,

"I plan my week… like when I'll study, when I'll go to the gym. I try to give myself rewards after I finish something."

These behaviours indicate active self-regulation and growing autonomy, central to SDT.

Self-reward systems were commonly used. Though not purely intrinsic, they represent internalised extrinsic motivation. The students adopt external incentives into meaningful personal routines (Ryan and Deci, 2020). This shift reflects a growing sense of control and ownership over learning.

 DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v9i2.27217

Participants also described adapting from Chinese learning environment to the UK's independent learning culture.

Student B shared,

"In China, teachers give you exactly what to memorise… here, I need to explore topics by myself, which was hard at first but now I find it more motivating."

This adaptation reflects a development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Since students gain confidence and see themselves as capable learners. Over time, their motivation becomes more self-directed. It also supported by structured strategies and stronger belief in their ability to succeed.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the research findings in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory. It explores how different types of motivation influence academic performance. Also, it focus on how students internalise external expectations. Then, it also investigates how they adapt to the learning environment in UK higher education. The discussion also considers the cultural context of Chinese undergraduate students and implications for practice.

5.1 Motivation Quality and Academic Performance

The survey revealed a clear outcome of students with higher self-motivation were more likely to achieve higher academic results. Most students who earned First-Class or Upper Second-Class degrees also reported "High" or "Very High" motivation. This supports SDT's difference between autonomous and controlled motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000a). Students who were driven by personal goals or interest in their courses showed greater persistence and consistency. It features associated with higher academic success. In contrast, students with lower motivation often relied on external pressures. Such as deadlines or expectations. Therefore, they had less consistent performance.

These results also align with Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997). Students who believed in their ability to succeed were more likely to engage in proactive behaviours. It included with setting goals and organising their time. Their confidence encourage the reinforce motivation and drive action. It also shows the interconnectedness between self-belief, effort, and performance.

5.2 Internalisation of External Motivators

These results also align with Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997). Students who believed in their ability to succeed were more likely to engage in proactive behaviours. It included with setting goals and organising their time. Their confidence encourage the reinforce motivation and drive action. It also shows the interconnectedness between self-belief, effort, and performance.

Many participants described beginning their studies with externally imposed motivations—family pressure, fear of failure, or peer comparison. Over time, however, these motivators often became more internalised. Students reframed external expectations as personal goals, which enhanced ownership and reduced emotional stress. This process is explained by Organismic Integration Theory, a component of SDT. As it shows how extrinsic motivation can become autonomous through internalisation (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

This internalisation process was especially evident in culturally embedded motivators. As Wondimu and Marjon (2006) argue, in collectivist cultures like China, external influences are not necessarily harmful if students finding collectivist cultures like China, personal meaning in them. Several students in this study used structured reinforcement, like rewards and comparison, as tools that supported rather than undermined motivation.

5.3 Self-Regulation and Learning Adaptation

Another key finding was the use of self-regulation strategies. For example, breaking tasks into smaller steps, planning weekly goals, and setting personal deadlines. These behaviours demonstrate growing autonomy and competence . These are two of the basic psychological needs identified in SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000a). The use of such strategies helped students to sustain motivation, manage pressure, and adapt to the independent learning style in UK universities.

This pattern also reflects increasing self-efficacy. As students successfully completed tasks and gained familiarity with academic expectations, they developed stronger confidence in their abilities. Therefore this confidence supported their willingness to take initiative and maintain motivation. These developments similar to the Zimmerman's (2000) view that self-efficacy supports self-regulated learning and long-term academic resilience.

5.4 Coexistence of Motivation Types

One notable finding was the coexistence of autonomous and controlled motivation. Students often described being driven by both personal goals and external pressures at the same time. For example, they found personal meaning in their academic work. Also, they were also motivated by deadlines, peer comparison, or family expectations. This challenges the common binary view in Western literature.

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Since, it separates intrinsic and extrinsic motivation too distinctly.

In the real-life, motivation appears more diversely particularly in intercultural contexts. Students do not simply motivates by single factor. However, they often draw on both simultaneously. This insight reinforces the value of using culturally contextualised motivation models and justifies the use of a mixed-methods approach in this study, which captured both patterns and personal complexity.

5.5 Implications and Reflections

The findings suggest that universities should design interventions that support the internalisation of external motivators, such as through autonomy-supportive teaching, personal goal-setting guidance, and meaningful feedback. Supporting the development of self-efficacy is equally important. They are more likely to stay motivated even under pressure when students feel capable and in control.

This study also highlights the need to respect the cultural dimensions of motivation. External expectations are not always negative. Students could internalise them in ways that promote autonomy and confidence. Understanding these dynamics can help educators and support staff better engage international students and foster sustainable academic motivation.

6. Conclusion

This dissertation explored the relationship between self-motivation and academic achievement among Chinese undergraduate students. This research integrate both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between levels of motivation and academic performance. It also underscore the essential role self-motivation plays in academic success. Qualitative finds provides a further understanding. It explains the students' strategic use of self-regulatory behaviours such as goal-setting, time-management, and self-rewarding to enhance the the motivation.

The research findings strongly supported self-determination theory, affirming that fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness significantly enhances motivation and academic performance. Furthermore, the concepts of growth mindset and self-efficacy provided additional theoretical depth to the analysis. Growth mindset highlights how students' belief of their abilities influenced their characteristics with academic challenges. Self-efficacy proved as a crucial factor. It demonstrates that students with higher confidence in their capacities were more likely to set ambiguous goals, and manage stress effectively. Therefore, they achieve better academic results. The research also introduced critical insights into the dynamic and adaptive nature of motivation. It also demonstrate how international students adapt the traditional sociocultural expectations in the intercultural educational context. Many students internalised the external pressures, such as familial expectations into supportive self motivational factors.

Practically, this dissertation highlights the importance of academic support. It plays an essential role on fostering autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Recommendations include implementing structured mentoring programs, workshops on intercultural competence, and adaptive academic assistance. Therefore, it could better assist Chinese students in transitioning effectively to autonomous learning environments.These approaches could significantly reduce the cultural gaps. It could also improve academic integration and student wellbeing.

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