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A Study of the Academic Challenges Faced by Chinese Students Studying in Malaysia Public University: A Focus on the Post-pandemic Era

Luoyu Wang*

[1] Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Corresponding Author*: Luoyu Wang E-mail: Wangluoyu0915@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the learning experiences of Chinese students in Malaysian public universities during the late stage of the pandemic. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used to select 12 Chinese international students currently studying at Malaysian public universities for focus group interviews. The use of focus groups provided a broader and more in-depth perspective for the research, aiming to explore the academic challenges faced by Chinese students studying in Malaysian public universities. The research findings from the focus group indicate that Chinese international students in Malaysian public universities are facing numerous academic challenges in the later stages of the pandemic, such as language barriers, teaching differences, internet obstacles, and study loneliness. Despite these academic challenges, most of them maintain a positive attitude and have a high motivation to adapt to different educational environments. Most students hold a positive attitude towards the educational regulations of the host university. Moreover, it has been discovered that effective communication between lecturers and students remains to be a crucial factor in international students' adaptation to the teaching system of the host country. The findings of this study can further enhance our understanding of students' learning experiences during the latter stages of a pandemic, the academic challenges they encounter, and the successful strategies for dealing with such challenges. Based on this research, recommendations can be provided to enhance the academic abilities of international students.

1. Introduction

From 1978 to 2019, a collective of 6,560,600 individuals from China have sought education opportunities outside their home country. As of the conclusion of 2019, a count of 1,656,200 individuals were engaged in academic pursuits or conducting research within educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020). Lately, there has been a consistent increase in China's interest in pursuing higher education in the Western countries, driven by the desire to acquire

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cultural capital. Currently, the approach of "providing assistance to students, fostering their return to China, granting them the freedom to travel, and facilitating their active participation" has been established as the guiding principle for China's efforts in the field of studying abroad in the modern era (Zhu, 2018). The number of Chinese students choosing to pursue their studies overseas is gradually increasing, with a wider range of regions becoming popular choices. Over the past decade, Malaysia has experienced a steady rise in popularity as a study abroad destination. The country's education system is highly regarded for its excellence, and the relatively affordable tuition fees and cost of living have made it an attractive choice for middle-class Chinese families and university educators seeking to enhance their qualifications. In 2022, the number of Chinese students in Malaysia skyrocketed to 39,010, marking a remarkable 557% increase from 2013(ChinaReportASEAN, 2022) (Statista Research Department, 2023).

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges to higher education, particularly in areas such as teaching, learning, research collaborations, and institutional governance. These challenges have had a profound effect on the progress of international higher education. In response to the pandemic, the Malaysian Ministry of Education implemented the MCO policy in March 2020, which necessitated the adoption of online learning platforms by all educational institutions. Malaysian lecturers and students began participating in online learning classrooms using tools such as Google Meet, Zoom, and other applications. As the pandemic persisted for over two years, many countries started to gradually ease public health and social measures (WHO, 2022). In February 2022, the Senior Minister of Defense, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, announced that the government would implement a phased approach to allow students from higher education institutions under the Ministry of Higher Education to return to their respective campuses. The implementation of this plan was set to begin on March 1st (Bernama, 2022). Consistent with the policy, a significant proportion of Malaysian universities have progressively shifted towards conducting face-to-face educational activities commencing from the onset of the initial semester of the 2022-2023 academic session. Nevertheless, the transition from online to offline study has posed considerable challenges for Chinese students who are now enrolled in public colleges in Malaysia. The existing literature on the effects of the pandemic on higher education in Malaysia has been examined, although it lacks comprehensive coverage of the primary obstacles encountered by international students and the corresponding approaches to surmounting these challenges. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to focus on the academic challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students who are pursuing their studies in Malaysia in the aftermath of the pandemic. Additionally, this research wants to explore the strategies employed by these students to overcome these issues. The primary objective of this project is to investigate and provide answers to the following research inquiries:

1. What are the primary academic challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students studying in Malaysia in the later phase of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Why did Chinese students studying in Malaysia in the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic face so many challenges to their academic progress?

3. What strategies did Chinese graduate students pursuing their studies in Malaysia employ to surmount the academic challenges they encountered?

This study aims to investigate the impact of the pandemic on higher education in Malaysia, with a particular focus on Chinese students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. The objective

of this study is to provide advice to education professionals, institutions, and international students in Malaysia, with the aim of enhancing the support provided to Chinese students during the post pandemic era. This study investigates effective approaches for tackling academic difficulties and offers recommendations to improve the academic abilities of Chinese overseas students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education

Since the onset of the outbreak in February 2020, numerous countries have implemented measures such as social distance and home quarantines to mitigate the spread of the virus among their populations (Shahzad, 2021). Following the implementation of comprehensive steps by China to close all educational establishments, encompassing schools, colleges, and universities, other nations subsequently adopted similar actions. According to a report by UNESCO, school closures have been imposed on a statewide scale in over 160 nations, impacting around 87 percent of students in higher education (de Oliveira Araújo, 2020). In Malaysia, a Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented from March 18 to March 31, 2020, and then extended until April 14, 2020. This measure entailed the temporary closure of various establishments, including pubs, stores, schools, and tertiary education institutions, while individuals were required to remain at their residences.

One of the primary consequences of the pandemic on the field of education was the abrupt transition from traditional in-person instruction to remote and virtual learning methods. While online learning has been utilized in higher education as an adjunctive instructional resource, its widespread adoption has not been actively encouraged. However, the unforeseen emergence of the pandemic has necessitated an immediate quest for a comprehensive online teaching and learning platform for educational institutions and schools. The predominant online learning platforms utilized in higher education institutions overseas encompass Google Classroom, Zoom, Webex, and Microsoft (Dash, 2021). These technologies present a valuable opportunity for higher education institutions and students to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Maatuk, 2022). In China, the predominant online learning platforms utilized by educational institutions and schools are Tencent Meeting and Nail. Previous research has indicated that these transitions have presented a range of obstacles for students, encompassing technical impediments, diminished motivation, and decreased levels of involvement. Moreover, it is worth noting that online education has exacerbated the disparity in academic performance among students belonging to diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This is mostly due to the limited availability of technology and internet connectivity, which disproportionately affects students hailing from low-income households. Certain courses and professions, such as those in the medical, technical, and engineering fields, face challenges in implementing e-learning due to the necessity for practical and hands-on learning experiences.

Furthermore, an additional consequence of the use of online teaching and learning methods amidst a pandemic in the field of education is the adverse effect it has on students' psychological well-being and mental health. Research has demonstrated that pandemics have a significant impact on the mental well-being of students, resulting in heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and despair. The pandemic-induced isolation and limited social connection have been found to exert detrimental effects on the mental well-being of students (Pandya, 2022). As a result of stringent isolation protocols and restricted avenues for social engagement, numerous students have expressed a sense of isolation and detachment from their peers and support systems.

2.2 The academic challenges faced by students studying abroad

The academic challenges and capacity for adaptation encountered by international students in tertiary education constitute a specific manifestation of the phenomenon known as 'culture shock', which is commonly observed among individuals who temporarily reside in foreign cultures (Spencer-Oatey, 2017). Prior studies have indicated that overseas students encounter a range of culturally diverse hurdles, including linguistic barriers, difficulties arising from educational and socio-cultural contexts, as well as instances of discrimination (Smith, 2011). International students face unique hurdles when it comes to overcoming academic difficulties. According to Bertram et al. (Bertram, 2014), a significant challenge faced by international students during the process of acculturation is the inherent conflict between assimilating into the unfamiliar academic environment and preserving their cultural self-worth. The primary objective of this study is to examine the academic difficulties encountered by Chinese overseas students enrolled at Malaysian public universities, as well as their corresponding strategies to address these obstacles.

The academic difficulties encountered by overseas students are widely attributed to the presence of cultural disparities in teaching and learning methodologies. The development of pedagogy is influenced by the distinct cultural values and beliefs prevalent within the society from which it originates (Campbell, 2008). There exist notable disparities in the methods and approaches employed in the realms of teaching and learning when comparing China to Western nations. The educational system in the Western world is frequently characterized as Socratic, as it emphasizes the generation or co-construction of knowledge via the use of questioning and examining beliefs. Furthermore, the development of problem-solving abilities and critical thinking skills is highly valued in this educational framework (Greenholtz, 2003). On the contrary, the conventional educational system rooted in Confucian principles in China places significant emphasis on the pedagogical approach of imitation and role modeling. This approach entails students imitating and emulating the ethical values and intellectual acumen of their teachers and esteemed individuals. Consequently, teachers assume the role of mentors, guiding the learning process, while students adopt a relatively passive stance within the classroom setting (Hofstede, 2016). The notable disparities in educational systems necessitate Chinese students to cultivate autonomous and self-directed learning abilities upon their enrollment at Western colleges (Qing Gu, 2006). Chinese students in Western schools are faced with significant problems pertaining to group discussion, teamwork, and critical thinking. When confronted with these obstacles, most Chinese students demonstrated successful adjustment to the novel educational setting while also preserving their cultural characteristics, including a notable drive for learning, a pronounced competitive spirit, and a profound reverence for their educators (Campbell, 2008).

In addition, students pursuing education in foreign countries have a significant obstacle in the form of linguistic differences. Lack of proficiency in the native language can pose challenges for students in comprehending lectures and engaging in classroom discourse. Additionally, language barriers impede effective communication between students, teachers, and peers, thereby potentially impeding academic achievement and hindering social integration (Sawir, 2005). This research endeavor aims to enhance comprehension of contemporary challenges and prospective developments pertaining to COVID-19, both during and post-pandemic, that could impact international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. Moreover, it seeks to offer guidance to educators, institutions, and students on how to effectively assist Chinese students studying in Malaysia in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions is uniform, with consistent effects observed across all such

institutions. The objective of this analysis is to examine the academic difficulties encountered by Chinese students studying in Malaysia and explore strategies for adapting and implementing appropriate responses within the Ministry of Higher Education's educational framework. This is crucial to safeguard the quality of international education in Malaysia during emergency situations. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to persist and transform into an endemic disease (Deguma, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

The present study employed a qualitative research methodology, specifically utilizing a focus group discussion approach, to gather data pertaining to the issue of interest. Before commencing the focus group discussion, the researcher conducted a pre-test to assess the validity, understandability, bias, and clarity of the questions (Masadeh, 2012). Before collecting data, the researcher conducted a pre-test of the questions on a sample of individual students (n = 6). Additionally, two researchers with expertise in focus group research reviewed and revised the questions for the focus group discussion, thereby enhancing the study's dependability. The example questions underwent a process of translation from Chinese to English and subsequently underwent back-translation, following an evaluation of participants' feedback. Subsequently, the inquiries were modified in accordance with comments provided by both participants and researchers, incorporating the criteria established by Dreachslin (Dreachslin, 1999) to enhance lucidity, promote comprehension of technical terms, and mitigate the presence of concealed biases. In conclusion, three questions were modified to enhance the clarity of the inquiries, as suggested by the test suggestions.

The objective of the focus group was to examine the academic challenges encountered by Chinese graduate students pursuing their studies in Malaysia in following years of the pandemic. This event aimed to facilitate the exchange of experiences and viewpoints among Chinese students studying in Malaysia regarding the academic challenges they encountered during the post-pandemic era. Participants were encouraged to share more details in a safe and impartial environment. Focus group discussions helped us understand Chinese students' experiences and acculturation in Malaysia. Through repeated question-and-answer exchanges, comprehensive subject matter information was obtained until the data saturated, yielding substantial insights.

Based on an analysis of the study experiences and unique challenges encountered by Chinese international students, this study employed a hybrid sampling strategy combining convenience and snowball sampling to gain a better understanding of the research topic, a more representative sample, and more generalizable results. In this study, convenience sampling was employed to enlist a sample of six Chinese students who were now pursuing their studies in Malaysia and expressed their willingness to participate in the focus group discussion. The sample consisted of two master's degree students and four PhD students representing various academic fields. Furthermore, the initial participants were requested to submit recommendations for further Chinese students pursuing their studies in Malaysia. The recommendations offered by the original participants were subsequently employed to enlist additional members for the focus group deliberations. Ultimately, a total of 12 participants were chosen, consisting of four master's students and eight doctorate students from various fields of study. This selection process considered the distinct learning experiences and challenges encountered by master's and doctoral students. The entire student population consisted of individuals pursuing studies in the social sciences, encompassing fields such as sociology,

psychology, education, and management. The researchers encountered restricted availability of participants pursuing studies in the fields of science and engineering at the universities included in the sample. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus group demographics.

Measures	**Items**	**Number**
Gender	Male	4
	Female	8
Academic year in school	First year	3
	Second year	5
	Third year	4
Major	Education	3
	Sociology	2
	Psychology	2
	Management	4
	Physical Education	1
Degree	Doctoral Program	8
	Master Program	4
Total		12

The researchers conducted two focus group interviews in accordance with the research questions and objectives. Freeman (Freeman, 2006) verified that a focus group interview typically comprises six to twelve participants and typically spans one to two hours till the participants are content with their conversation on the subject. The number of participants is sufficiently modest to allow for everyone's contribution, but still being large enough to facilitate the sharing of diverse viewpoints inside the group, rather than dividing it into smaller parallel conversations. The initial data for the sample questions was obtained from the first focus group, which included six respondents recruited through convenience sampling and a facilitator who had a similar study abroad experience. The second focus group consisted of twelve respondents and a facilitator selected through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. As six participants in the second focus group had previously taken part in the first focus group, they were able to delve deeper into the sample questions and encourage the first-time participants to share more comprehensive information.

3.2 Data collection

Students who were contacted for this study met in a prearranged conference room for focus groups on January 31, 2024, and March 6, 2024. The researcher oversaw all contacts for this study. Several factors were considered while deciding where to hold the focus discussions. Initially, the seating arrangement had a circular configuration, so facilitating more participation and interaction among all participants in the subject matter. Additionally, measures were taken to guarantee a noise-free environment during the sessions. Both focus group interviews had an average duration of 1.5 hours, spanning from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Participants in the focus group talks were presented with a box of chocolates as a gesture of gratitude (Masadeh, 2012) .

Two seasoned facilitators led the session, overseeing and directing the entire conversation, ensuring that all significant matters were addressed, preventing distractions, and promoting active participation from all participants to ensure equal opportunity for expression. Additionally, the researcher took notes with the interviewees' consent (Prince, 2001). The sessions were documented and subsequently examined for data analysis. According to Stevart (Stewart, 2014), the optimal number of questions for a focus group interview is less than twelve (see Table 2). Focus group discussions are a highly valuable qualitative research methodology employed to collect qualitative data for a specified objective, which is rooted in an observable phenomenon or a mutually agreed-upon theme (Dilshad, 2013). According to Stewart (Stewart, 2014), this study followed a series of steps to ensure good research practices: developing research questions, preparing the focus group, interviewing participants, transcribed discussion content, analyzed data, extracted keywords, performed theme analysis in NVivo, and finally, a summary of the study's findings. After providing specific demographic details, the focus group discussion employed open-ended, semi-structured questions to inquire about the challenges encountered in verbal communication, curriculum design, teaching methods, group work, and their relationship with teachers. The primary themes explored were the academic difficulties they faced in the post-pandemic era and the coping strategies they employed. Additionally, other subjects that arose during the focus group discussions were also addressed. Lastly, the moderator's remarks served to summarize and conclude the focus group session. As indicated in Table 2.

We will talk about the issues you're having and the things you're trying to do to deal with academically while studying in Malaysia after the epidemic broke out. The primary objective of this study is to examine the academic challenges encountered by Chinese students pursuing their education in Malaysian public universities during a specific period. Additionally, we will explore the strategies employed by Chinese students to address these challenges and propose recommendations for enhancing their academic proficiency. The survey content is solely intended for research reasons, therefore, please feel stress-free when responding to the questions.

Table 2. Sample question transcript for focus group.

We will talk about the issues you're having and the things you're trying to do to deal with academically while studying in Malaysia after the epidemic broke out. The primary objective of this study is to examine the academic challenges encountered by Chinese students pursuing their education in Malaysian public universities during a specific period. Additionally, we will explore the strategies employed by Chinese students to address these challenges and propose recommendations for enhancing their academic proficiency. The survey content is solely intended for research reasons, therefore, please feel stress-free when responding to the questions.
1. When transitioning from a classroom where Chinese was the medium of instruction to one where

English was the medium of instruction, did you experience any language barriers? (Please elucidate the instances throughout your study abroad experience wherein you perceived a linguistic obstacle with your instructors and classmates.)

2. What are the distinctions between Malaysian universities and Chinese universities with regards to teaching method, curriculum design, and the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship? (Kindly provide a detailed account of the performance.)

3. What are the distinctions between the university's offline courses delivered in the later stages of the pandemic and the online courses offered before the epidemic? Were these programs able to satisfy your academic requirements?

4. What was the impact of the Internet barrier between China and Malaysia on your academic pursuits? In what manners?

5. What were the primary methods of communication with your teachers and classmates during and after the epidemic? Have you had instances of loneliness and anxiety? Please provide a description of the various methods in which.

6. How are you presently managing the previously mentioned challenges? Kindly provide a comprehensive explanation.

7. What recommendations would you offer to Chinese students aspiring to pursue their studies in Malaysia subsequently? What guidance would you offer to universities in Malaysia?

3.3 Data analysis

The NVivo data analysis application was used to code and evaluate the content and themes of the focus group discussion. There were three distinct stages involved in the data processing process, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initially, all transcripts of focus group discussions were subjected to open coding following numerous readings. After that, common and unique topics pertaining to the academic challenges encountered by overseas Chinese students and how they overcame those challenges were defined (Corbin, 2014). The connections between codes and themes were examined more closely. During this phase, the data underwent examination and methodical exploration to derive significance. We analyzed the two focus groups' findings to find commonalities and differences; we looked specifically at the academic challenges encountered by international students from China, where those challenges originated, how students dealt with them, and why they did so. The data will be examined in the subsequent sections.

4. Research Finding

Using NVivo, we were able to extract keywords from the first focus group discussion (Figure 1), and then we used those keywords to guide a more in-depth discussion in the second focus group discussion. The results indicate that the academic challenges faced by Chinese students studying in Malaysia after the pandemic primarily stem from the language barrier and pedagogical differences between China and Malaysia in terms of curriculum design, teaching methods, and relationships between teachers and students. Furthermore, Chinese students experienced significant discomfort due to communication anxiety and test anxiety resulting from the transition from extended online classes to offline classes. Chinese students exhibited a relatively favorable response considering these hurdles. They successfully surmounted the language barrier and successfully adjusted to the

curriculum employed by Malaysian universities.



Figure 1: Keywords in first focus group discussion

4.1 Academic Challenges Related to Pedagogical Differences

4.1.1 Medium of Instruction

The quality of scientific research is now judged by the articles published in high-impact journals in English, rather than by the research process itself. This shift in emphasis has a direct effect on academics' language choices when conducting research, as the internationalization of higher education has made the dissemination of results more important than the research itself (Larrinaga, 2015). Malaysia, being a country with diverse ethnic and language backgrounds, has experienced a transition in the language used for teaching in higher education. This change began in 1993 when the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad (who served from 1981 to 2003), publicly announced the adoption of English as the primary language for teaching science and technology courses in public higher education institutions (PHEIs). Presently, most courses offered in Malaysian public universities are delivered in the English language. Chinese students pursuing education in Malaysian public universities have undergone extensive English language acquisition and have successfully met the English language prerequisites set by their institutions for international students. However, the historical prevalence of monolingual education, wherein Chinese serves as the primary medium of instruction, has resulted in significant language challenges for most Chinese students upon their initial entry into Malaysian public university classes.

Speaking and writing were the most common areas where students encountered language barriers while studying in Malaysia. This is mostly since Chinese English language classes tend to place more emphasis on reading and grammar than on developing students' ability to carry on natural conversations in the language. Simultaneously, the passive-acceptance learning approach and the limited opportunities for oral practice in the English language posed challenges for Chinese students in achieving fluency in English expression. These issues have a significant impact on the engagement of Chinese students in the classroom, leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to communicate with instructors and peers in Malaysian universities. Due to the language barrier, students avoided interacting with instructors and classmates after moving to face-to-face classes.

“After 3 weeks of the semester, I informed my instructor of my intention to withdraw from the course. The decision to withdraw was prompted by the presence of a language barrier. I had anxiety during an English-only academic conference as I struggled to comprehend the conference material.” (Participant M)

“I was terrible at English and would sit quietly in my online classes, thinking no one would notice that I was an outcast. Neither my teacher nor my classmates would notice me either. Following the offline classes, there has been a slight improvement in the situation, resulting in increased opportunities for communication with the teacher.” (Participant K)

4.1.2 Curriculum design

Malaysian public universities have a curriculum design that is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. This means that students here are encouraged to think for themselves and be creative, that there is an emphasis on electives and interdisciplinary research, and that students here place a premium on developing their critical thinking and practical skills. Students are not limited by institutions or disciplines in their course selection beyond the 2-3 required courses; they are free to tailor their course schedules to their individual needs. University curricula in China, on the other hand, are more rigid and prescriptive, with an emphasis on mandatory public courses like Marxist philosophy and an overview of modern Chinese history, and less room for student choice in electives. Most students expressed their support for differences in curriculum design, asserting that a learner-centered approach aids in directing their research, reducing time expenses, and improving their individual academic performance.

“From what I’ve gathered, the Chinese graduate curriculum includes several public required courses, such as Marxist Philosophy and Theoretical Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Besides Malay language, there are no comparable public mandatory courses in Malaysian universities. This frees up graduate students to focus on subjects directly linked to their chosen fields of study.” (Participant M)

Nevertheless, certain students expressed worries and believed that the adaptable course structure led them astray and hindered their ability to study well.

“There are few fixed courses that we need to study in Malaysian universities, but we need to acquire a lot of knowledge, there is no way to support me to complete my research if I only study the mandatory courses set by the university, but what courses I need to study besides the mandatory courses need to be decided by me, which is a challenge for me.” (Participant L)

4.1.3. Teaching methods

Most Malaysian public university professors adopt a mixed method to the classroom, direct lecturing, interactive learning, and experiential learning are often the two or three modalities of instruction they employ. All participants who took part in the focus group discussions indicated that their instructors employed a wide range of teaching methods in their respective specialty courses. Students can participate in various study groups and communicate with peers from all around the world through interactive learning, which improves their capacity to work together to learn. Using indirect methods of instruction has several benefits, including letting students freely explore ideas and information, fostering the development of creativity and interpersonal skills, reducing anxiety about making mistakes, and ultimately leading to a better grasp of the subject matter and the ability to apply what they've learned. Chinese students who have traditionally embraced a teacher-centered

teaching method may experience early feelings of being overwhelmed when faced with interactive or indirect teaching methods. Consequently, they may harbor concerns about their ability to satisfy the instructor's expectations.

“Students are expected to independently explore the topic. On occasion, we may be heading in the incorrect direction while investigating, and all we can do is wait for his next communication with us to figure it out.” (Participant D)

Nevertheless, not all teachers were capable of inspiring students, and a portion of them managed to handle the circumstances.

“Some teacher's class hardly ever engaged with its students, a three-hour lesson that started at nine o'clock lasted only around fifteen minutes and we learned very little during that time.” (Participant L)

4.1.4. Teacher-student relationships

Chinese instructors are very invested in their students' success and are happy to get to know them on a personal level; students and instructors often dine together, and the relationship between the two stays strong even after class has ended. Such occurrences are rare in Malaysia. A large majority of students interviewed at public universities in Malaysia reported feeling poorly cared for by their professors, who they described as emotionally distant and difficult to get in touch with. This circumstance has emerged as a significant academic challenge for students who are incapable of finishing their studies.

“After enrolling, many of my classmates had trouble getting in touch with their supervisor. Messages sent via WhatsApp and email went unanswered, and when my classmates visited their supervisor's office, the supervisor claimed he didn't have time to meet with them. There is no such thing as an inaccessible supervisor in China, if we have an issue, we can just go to the office and locate someone there.” (Participant Z)

Teachers in Malaysian universities hold the belief that their relationship with students is primarily professional and does not necessitate the establishment of personal connections. Several doctorate students who had job experience in China conveyed their comprehension of the teacher-student relationships.

“I should focus on learning everything in class because there's no option to ask the instructor anything afterward. And this can help teachers relax a bit more, after all, they work very hard and field a lot of questions from students. Effective communication, as desired by the teacher, holds significant importance.” (Participant S)

4.2 Academic Challenges of Online-Offline Instruction

More than two years of online classes had a detrimental effect on Chinese students' mental health and academic performance. The subsequent instability caused by the shift from online to offline classes only made matters worse. Transitioning from online to offline classes necessitates students to adapt to the physical classroom, particularly those who have been receiving online classes for over two years and are accustomed to utilizing technology tools for learning purposes. Automated captioning, real-time translation, and video recording software have been essential in enhancing student academic achievements in the context of online classes. During prolonged periods of online instruction, students heavily depended on technology tools to surmount language

barriers and successfully accomplish learning objectives. However, the inability to utilize these technology tools when transitioning to offline classes presented notable academic challenges.

“I can record the video of the instructor's class and then turn it into text, so I can go over the material fast and understand everything. Online classes are much more flexible. Offline learning has several drawbacks, such as the fact that students must show up at a certain location at a certain time to listen to class and the fact that they can't capture every word the teacher says.” (Participant D)

On the other hand, the imbalanced academic pressure after switching from online to offline classes puts a great burden on international students. Chinese students face challenges in accessing pertinent information required for academic study due to the presence of network isolation between China and Malaysia. Learning progresses slowly and pertinent assignments are not completed within the allotted time because of the lack of interaction between students and teachers in online classes.

“Many WhatsApp messages have been read but not answered, and delayed or nonexistent responses are typical. I had no choice but to keep texting my instructor about this issue; regardless of his response rate, I would send him my queries and wait for him to address them at one of our future sessions. The waiting was stressful and pointless.” (Participant M)

4.3 Chinese students’ academic challenges responses

Despite frequent academic challenges stemming from disparities between Malaysian and Chinese teaching and learning, many respondents expressed satisfaction with the learner-centered curriculum design and teaching method of Malaysian public universities. The classes in Malaysian public universities were frequently characterized as "challenging" and "useful". The reasonably high quality of instruction and the English-only classroom setting met with their satisfaction.

Chinese students have been striving to create improvements despite the challenges that present. Students undergo personal transformation as they adjust to their new instructional environment and the environment around them. In the two focus groups, students of different genders, degree programs, and university levels did not significantly differ in their accounts of their learning experiences. Students from various public universities expressed satisfaction with the educational quality offered by these institutions. However, there were subtle differences in how students from different majors responded to these academic challenges. In comparison, students pursuing a degree in Education and Sociology exhibited a deeper comprehension of the teaching methods employed at Malaysian public universities, a stronger sense of belonging to the local culture, and a greater inclination to meet the expectations of their instructors. Management, Physical Education, and Psychology majors faced more academic challenges, particularly in dissertation writing and research methodology, and Chinese international students struggled with the higher dissertation writing and publication requirements.

In general, the academic challenges were met with a positive response from Chinese students. They progressively adjusted to offline class, and as a result, their dedication to learning increased. The sense of community and support among Chinese students in Malaysia greatly aided their academic success, particularly as they got to know one another. Students exchanged their learning experiences and collaborated to establish learning objectives. Well-defined objectives are the paramount element in surmounting academic challenges.

“To stay highly motivated and focused on completing your study abroad goals, it's helpful to have both large and minor goals. Make sure you know exactly what you want to do each semester, and then combine the two. Then, keep going until you conquer each obstacle. At the end of the day, we want to have earned a degree, so we break it down into smaller goals that we can accomplish each semester.” (Participant J)

5. Discussion

Chinese students who are pursuing their education in public universities in Malaysia encounter numerous academic challenges. The academic challenges arise due to disparities in pedagogy between Chinese and Malaysian universities. The shift in instruction language, radically new curriculum designs and teaching methods, and student and teacher estrangement due to religion and culture are the key issues.

The primary academic challenge encountered by Chinese students is the shift in the medium of instruction. Although Chinese students have made significant attempts to acquire English over the past two decades, most of them still have a limited proficiency in the language (Xiuwen, 2020) (Zhang, 2017). Chinese students struggle to participate in classroom discussions and group work due to the language barrier, and they cannot form personal relationships with their teachers and peers, preventing them from receiving academic help. In the context of online class, a range of technological tools were employed to address this issue. After offline teaching resumed, technological instruments failed and Chinese students in Malaysia faced the language barrier again.

Chinese students face substantial academic challenges due to variations in curriculum design and teaching methods. Chinese universities prioritize the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students through curriculum design, teaching methods, and student assessment. It is anticipated that students will demonstrate reverence towards knowledge and teachers, and the dynamic between learners and lecturers is characterized by a hierarchical structure (Greenholtz, 2003) (Wang, 2006). This has made most Chinese students dependent on schools and teachers and lacking critical thinking. School and teachers should organize every learning stage for them so they can finish schooling. Malaysian public colleges and universities expect students to be more engaged, independent, and critical in class. Graduation requirements are the only things the university specifies; there are no hard and fast rules about when or how a student must finish these requirements, and faculty members will not micromanage their work. The result is that many Chinese students struggle to understand what they need to study, lack effective study strategies, and end up failing to finish their assignments on time. Chinese students at Malaysian universities often find it challenging to form personal relationships with their professors due to cultural and religious differences, language barriers, and gaps in teaching methods.

Furthermore, Chinese students encountered difficulties in adapting to the academic challenges arising from the transition from online to offline teaching in the final stages of the pandemic. The primary manifestation of this difficulty was the significant decrease in digital assistance that occurred after the transition from online to offline instruction. Over the past few semesters, students have been fully engaged in digital settings. Chinese international students have primarily depended on subtitling and translation technology to overcome language barriers and advance academically. Participants had notable enhancements in their learning outcomes during lectures and gradually developed a dependence on audio recordings, subtitles, and real-time translation systems. According to (Purwanto, 2020) (Pokhrel, 2021), and (Weldon, 2021), The students perceived

lecture recordings as highly advantageous during the stages of revision and assessment. Upon the complete shift to offline study, a significant number of digital tools became inaccessible, hence presenting a considerable obstacle for the students.

In conclusion, academic challenges stem mostly from cultural and language barriers, disparities in pedagogy between China and Malaysia, and the decline in digital resources that have accompanied the trend away from onsite instruction. Chinese students exhibited a favorable demeanor in response to these academic challenges. They had the belief that the instructional techniques employed in Malaysian classrooms were favorable for their individual growth, thus they made a good adjustment by endeavoring to comprehend and embrace their teachers' teaching methods. They endeavor to adapt to the novel pedagogical approaches and teacher-student dynamics to enhance their proficiency in the English language. As offline instruction becomes more prevalent, Chinese students studying in Malaysia demonstrate a robust sense of unity and reciprocal assistance. International students engage in the exchange of their educational experiences, facilitating the establishment of shared learning objectives and the resolution of learning challenges among one another. The sense of unity fosters beneficial outcomes for Chinese students in surmounting academic obstacles.

The researchers offered recommendations for Chinese overseas students pursuing their studies in Malaysian public higher education institutions during the late epidemic era, based on the data. It is imperative for Chinese overseas students to adequately equip themselves prior to their admission into Malaysian public higher education institutions to complete their academic degrees. This entails thorough preparation in areas such as language proficiency, study planning, and psychological readiness. To begin with, language preparation. Following the successful completion of standardized tests like IELTS or TOEFL, students should further engage in reading English literature pertaining to their field of study to acquaint oneself with the vocabulary. It is imperative for students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees to possess a comprehensive understanding and proficiency in the research methodologies employed in international academic publications. The research methodologies employed in Chinese academic papers exhibit notable distinctions when compared to those utilized in foreign countries. Proficiency in these research procedures is crucial for the successful completion of a thesis. Additionally, it is feasible to access academic videos disseminated by academics affiliated with higher education institutions in Malaysia. By doing this, you can become acquainted with the English accent of Malaysians and enhance your academic expertise.

Furthermore, it is imperative for all students intending to pursue a degree program in Malaysia to possess a well-defined understanding of their objectives for studying abroad, the curriculum plan and graduation criteria of the institution, and strategically organize their studies accordingly to ensure a sequential completion of their academic journey. The assistance of the host school is necessary for this task. It is expected that the host institution will conduct a comprehensive orientation session for students at the commencement of the registration period, with the aim of providing clarity regarding the study plan, graduation prerequisites, and graduation procedures associated with each program. Additionally, there is an expectation that the host institution will be able to arrange a greater number of academic lectures, thereby affording students the chance to engage with esteemed academics at the forefront of academia. This would serve to offer students the necessary assistance to consistently enhance their academic proficiency.

Finally, students need to be mentally ready to take on problems in the classroom. Adapting to

new teaching methods and teacher-student relationships are only a few of the challenges that students face while pursuing a master's or doctoral degree. Other obstacles include language and academic challenges. With the right mental preparation, students can also successfully overcome challenges and pressure to drop out of university. Meanwhile, by making many friends among their professors and fellow students, students can conquer mental health issues like worry and loneliness.

6. Limitations & Implications for Future Studies

Collectively, these data can provide insight into the academic difficulties encountered by international students from mainland China in Malaysian public higher education institutions during the late pandemic period, as well as the initiatives undertaken to address them. Enhancing the visibility and impact of Malaysian higher education in China is advantageous. The growing influx of international students from mainland China pursuing education in ASEAN countries necessitates further investigation of the academic challenges faced by these students throughout their time in ASEAN countries. To make sure the results are representative of all Chinese students studying in Malaysia, it would be wise to look at Chinese students at private higher education institutions in Malaysia in the future, considering the nature of Malaysian universities. Furthermore, future research endeavors may also direct their attention towards additional nations, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, which serve as prominent educational hubs for Chinese overseas students. Moreover, this study exclusively employed focus group discussion as the primary method of data collection from international students residing in mainland China. Additionally, the study's sample size was limited. Hence, it is recommended that future studies consider increasing the sample size and broadening the scope to perform research of a comparable type. Future research should employ triangulation to gather data from various stakeholders, including as instructors, lecturers, policy makers, and administrators. This approach would enhance the comprehensiveness, persuasiveness, and credibility of the study.

Data Availability Statements

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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