RESEARCH ARTICLE

BON VIEW
BON VIEW PUBLISHING

A Study on Educational Integration in the Multicultural Context of Malaysia: An Analysis of the Current Situation of Chinese PhD Students

Xiujuan Zhang[1,2*]

[1] *Graduate School of Business, SEGI University, Malaysia*

[2] *School of Economics and Management, Yunnan Technology and Business University, China*

Abstract: Malaysia, as a typical multicultural country, actively promotes cultural integration in the field of education to cultivate talents with a global perspective and cross-cultural communication abilities. In order to better achieve educational integration, Malaysia, from the government to universities, is emphasizing the concept of multicultural education, strengthening cross-cultural communication and cooperation, enhancing the ability of teachers to provide multicultural education, while also emphasizing balance and fairness. This study specifically analyzes PhD students from China in order to understand their degree of adaptation to multicultural living and learning during their doctoral studies in Malaysia, ultimately interpreting the feelings and experiences of Chinese PhD students toward educational integration and providing some reference for the diversified development of education in Malaysia and even globally. The premise of educational integration is to adapt to local culture and society. Studies have shown that general life, cultural, and social adjustments are the main challenges for Chinese PhD students to adapt to life in Malaysia. For Chinese PhD students, the challenge of successfully integrating Malaysia's multiculturalism with education and learning is still quite daunting. The first priority is language and cultural adaptation. Some Chinese PhD students who have successfully adapted to the multicultural background of Malaysia's educational integration shared how they have adopted more proactive strategies to adapt to the difficulties and challenges encountered and have persevered. These strategies provide reference and guidance for other Chinese PhD students who need to improve their adaptability.

Keywords: Malaysia, multicultural, education integration, Chinese PhD students, adaptation, experience, reference, guidance
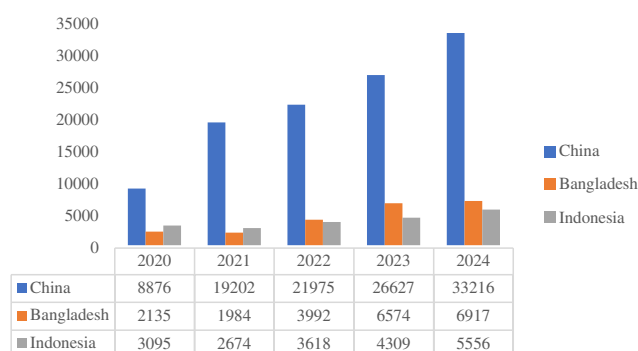
1. Introduction

According to the data released by the Malaysian Education Global Service Center, as of the fourth quarter of 2024, a total of 59039 applications for studying abroad in Malaysia were received. Compared to 48129 in 2023, there has been an increase of 10910 people! Among these 59039 applications, the top five countries in terms of country and region are China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. In terms of learning level, from high to low, they are a degree, master's, PhD, certificate, and diploma. In terms of institutional types, 35881 applications were directed toward private universities, which is 9771 more than 26110 applications directed toward public universities. Accumulated data from 2020 to 2024 show that studying in Malaysia is widely welcomed in East Asia, where the number of international students has been increasing year by year and has been ranked first for five consecutive years.

The author would like to point out that among the 59039 applicants, there were 33216 applications from China alone, accounting for 56.3%, ranking first among all applicants from other countries. In fact, not only in 2024 but also from 2020 to 2023, the number of applications from Chinese international students has consistently ranked first and has been increasing year by year [1]! Figure 1 shows the top three countries and numbers of international students in Malaysia in the past five years.

Malaysia is fast becoming the top choice for overseas students seeking a higher education because of its more hospitable culture, especially for Chinese PhD students, more affordable tuition, use of English as the primary language of instruction, and better standard of living [2]. However, as we all know, Malaysia is a country with a multicultural background composed of Malays, Chinese, and Indian Tamils, and the diversity of religious beliefs has also become a major feature of the country [3]. In addition to ethnic and religious diversity, the diversity of language and culture is also an important part of the diversity of Malaysian society [3]. Can Chinese PhD candidates easily adjust to such a diverse environment? Is the successful integration of education possible? It is critical to comprehend how Chinese PhD students accomplish educational integration in a

*Corresponding author: Xiujuan Zhang, Graduate School of Business, SEGI University, Malaysia and School of Economics and Management, Yunnan Technology and Business University, China. Email: Zhangxiujuan@mail.xingaojiao.com

Figure 1
Top three countries and number of international students in Malaysia from 2020 to 2024

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
China	8876	19202	21975	26627	33216
Bangladesh	2135	1984	3992	6574	6917
Indonesia	3095	2674	3618	4309	5556

Note: The data are from Education Malaysia Global Service Centre [1].

multicultural setting, given the growing number of Chinese PhD students pursuing doctorates in Malaysia [2].

At present, doctoral research has received increasing attention in studies that focus on issues such as doctoral student experiences, academic paper writing, and doctoral course design. The efficiency of doctoral studies has also been identified as a challenge [4]. Due to the need to take on professional responsibilities unrelated to their studies, many doctoral students progress slowly and are unable to graduate within the prescribed time. And up to 80% of Chinese international students pursuing doctoral degrees in Malaysia work full-time or part-time outside of university [4]. For doctoral students, the process of completing a degree is emotionally and intellectually intense, involving multiple complex challenges; it is a lonely and painful journey [4]. For Chinese PhD students studying abroad in Malaysia, they face even more challenges, one of which is how to smoothly adapt to the language, academic, and other aspects in the multicultural context of Malaysia. To clarify these questions, this study will comprehensively review the adaptation dilemma of foreign students, the concept and connotation of educational integration, and the literature on the Malaysian higher education system in the second part. Based on this, the focus of this research will be reiterated in detail. The third part is research methods, including data collection, samples, and data analysis. The fourth part is the results and discussion of data analysis. The fifth part is the conclusion of the study, the implications for practice, and the limitations of the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The adaptation dilemma of foreign students

Language and English-based instructional materials present the most challenge for foreign students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions [2]. The author learned from daily communication with several classmates who came to Malaysia to study for a PhD that, except for a very small number of students with good English-speaking and listening skills, the vast majority of students have obstacles in English communication. Due to the lack of language training support, Chinese PhD students generally face difficulties in writing academic papers in English [2, 5]. Behind language lies culture; language and culture are inseparable. To learn a new language, it is necessary to understand the culture behind it [6]. Language and culture are so closely linked that they cannot be separated without sacrificing the importance of language or culture [7].

Previous studies have demonstrated that culture can, in fact, enhance language acquisition [8]. Culture is often a contributing factor to the success or failure of second or foreign language learning [8]. However, Malaysian languages include not only English but also Malay and Mandarin. Not only Chinese international students, but even students from Saudi Arabia and Yemen who study in Malaysia face language barriers, making it difficult to interact with domestic students. Even if some foreign students use the correct language form, they may encounter certain obstacles when expressing meaning to local people, because due to cultural differences, the meaning represented by a certain word may be completely different [9]. According to some academics, "fluency alone is not enough to communicate with people from different cultures in an effective manner" [8]. In English teaching, the culture of English-speaking countries such as Malaysia is likely to be inseparable from English learning, as culture provides an environment for learners to learn how to use the language, and learning culture helps learners fully understand the culture originating from the target language [6]. It is understandable why learning English with a heavy Malaysian accent is tough or even excruciating for overseas students [2].

Some scholars have also shown that language-related issues can affect the social adaptation of international students. For example, English is a medium of teaching, while domestic students converse in their mother tongue, making it difficult for students to establish social networks with domestic students and potentially leading to a sense of alienation from the learning environment. For international students, a lack of a hometown and familiar cultural and linguistic environment is an important reason for feeling isolated [2]. Many international students find it difficult to adapt to society because they must develop relationships or establish connections in a new cultural context [5]. Usually, misunderstandings are caused by international students not understanding the cultural information of the host country and a lack of understanding of the cultural customs of international students among local people [2, 10].

In addition, the living conditions in foreign countries also pose great challenges to international students. The hot climate in Malaysia throughout the year is unbearable for international students, especially those from China, which has distinct seasons. Some studies suggest that international students should adapt to different food, living environments, and climate environments, and pay attention to the challenges brought by finance and health [2]. Several research reports suggest that financial resources are crucial for successfully obtaining a doctoral degree [11–13]. While they might not be allowed to live on or close to campus, other issues including a lack of entertainment, physical activity, and hobbies might also have an impact on how well international students adjust [2]. This suggests that in order to help overseas students adjust, Malaysian universities must constantly update and renovate their current infrastructure and services [2].

2.2. Education as an instrument for integration

"A dynamic approach that actively addresses student diversity and views individuals, where differences are not a problem, but rather opportunities to enrich learning," is how educational integration is defined [14]. The education system or institution must recognize and take into account the primary demands of international students in order to successfully integrate them into the educational process. This involves the following requirements: (a) master the language of the new country; (b) keep speaking in their mother tongue; (c) overcome academic setbacks; (d) adjust to the new educational system; (e) interact with people; (f) form

relationships and have a sense of belonging; (g) develop a strong sense of self; (h) feel secure; and (i) deal with trauma, loss, and separation [15]. Different countries employ different techniques to integrate education, but some of them include early assessment and tailored learning plans, introductory and transitional courses, language training and support, mother tongue tutoring, and inclusive learning environments [15]. Ratri et al. [6] recommend that higher education institutions in Malaysia incorporate local culture into English instruction in order to facilitate overseas students' easy and expeditious educational integration. Because it creates a familiar learning environment, the incorporation of local cultures has an effect on English instruction as well [6]. According to some research, students' engagement in English language learning increases when local culture is incorporated into the curriculum, and they become more familiar with the subjects covered [6, 16]. Students are also more motivated to learn about familiar objects, ideas, or things around them, and they are exposed to materials including local culture [7, 17, 18].

2.3. Overview of the Malaysian higher education system

In an effort to increase education quality and undergo reform, Malaysia's higher education system has undergone a number of trends [19]. According to Malakolunthu and Rengasamy [20], Malaysian higher education institutions have undergone redesigns in order to more effectively meet the socioeconomic objectives of the government. Malaysia is now the epicenter of education as a result of the substantial changes made to the country's higher education system by the ongoing escalation of globalization [19]. The entire nation must become an "education center" in order to attain this pivotal position, which will need the implementation of numerous initiatives [21]. A strategic strategy to attract international students, international joint degree programs, and branch campus establishment are some examples of specific measures [19]. The higher education system in Malaysia is steadily moving toward the goal of cultivating graduates who are competitive in the global market [22]. Nawi [22] also points out that Malaysia's higher education system is increasingly moving toward the world. The restructuring of this education policy has provided opportunities for foreign stakeholders to collaborate with local colleges and universities and has also attracted a large number of foreign students studying in Malaysia, most of whom are from China.

Malaysia aspires to establish a higher education system that ranks among the world's leading education systems, enabling it to compete in the global economy [21]. Malaysia is a member of the Commonwealth and inherits the good education system of the UK, with a relatively high level of education. For a long time, it has been collaborating with universities in the UK, Australia, and the USA to offer various courses, with English as the primary language of instruction [23]. These universities have good connections with the UK, Australia, and the USA. The advantages of dual programs are quite evident [21]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has ranked Malaysia as the 11th best educational choice in the world, rising to 9th place in 2020, and has recognized it as one of the top ten destination countries for international students.

According to Pi et al. [23], government spending on education has been rising gradually as the economy expands. The Malaysian government has implemented extensive and thorough reforms in higher education along with a more open education policy. These actions have improved the overall quality and level of higher education, quickly increased the scope of higher education in Malaysia,

and improved collaboration and exchanges between Malaysian and international universities [24]. In the global market for international student education, Malaysian higher education institutions have somewhat improved their allure and competitiveness. This has helped to build a strong base for drawing in a sizable number of students from nearby and far-off states and advancing the quality of education for Malaysian international students. The number of international students being accepted into Malaysia's higher education institutions has been rising annually in recent years. Malaysian students primarily come from China, which is also the largest source of Chinese students studying overseas.

2.4. Research focus

The above literature review presents three key points in total. First, there is relatively little research on understanding the adaptation of international students to Malaysia's multicultural higher education system and their experiences as students in Malaysia, especially regarding the study of Chinese PhD students, which still has a gap [2]. Second, existing research focuses on the adaptation issues of graduate students in public universities, but there are still many Chinese PhD students studying at private universities in Malaysia [1]. As of 2024, Malaysia has a total of 20 public universities, 434 private universities, 36 polytechnics, and 105 community colleges, with private universities accounting for 72.9% [19]. Third, it is necessary to hear the voices of international students from different countries, but so far, many studies in Malaysia have focused on Middle Eastern students [2].

The author remembers a scholar who once said that the more opportunities we have to learn about the cultures of other countries in the world, the more we will realize the greatness of our own culture and feel prouder of our own culture [25]. Different countries have different political, economic, and social conditions, forming their own unique ethnic cultures. Only by maintaining the diversity of world cultures can the world become more diverse and vibrant. In response to the continuous increase in the number of Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia in recent years, the author hopes that through this study, we can clarify the issue of how to better achieve educational integration in Malaysia's multicultural background and contribute our humble efforts to Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia.

The following are the issues that this study aims to explore regarding language, lifestyle, and learning adjustments for Chinese PhD students pursuing doctoral degrees at private universities in Malaysia:

1) What are the difficulties faced by Chinese PhD students in learning and living in Malaysia's multicultural background?
2) What is the learning and living adaptation situation of Chinese PhD students in Malaysia's multicultural background?
3) What measures can help Chinese PhD students quickly adapt to Malaysia's multicultural background and smoothly achieve educational integration?

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data collection

This study adopts a "mixed method," which combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative analysis data come from a questionnaire survey, including demographic and academic details such as gender, age, frequency of coming to Malaysia, years of work experience, first language, second language, course

grades, motivation to pursue a PhD in Malaysia, etc. To ensure the accuracy of the questionnaire survey data, the author also invited 10 Chinese PhD students to conduct a small-scale pre-survey before formally collecting the questionnaire data. After finalizing the content of the questionnaire survey, data will be collected in the form of an "online self-administered questionnaire survey." Participants can fill out the survey questionnaire by logging into the "Wenjuanxing" website. The website for the survey questionnaire is public and unrestricted, and anyone can fill it out by logging in. To improve the accuracy of the survey, it will be conducted anonymously.

Participants were informed that their participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and due to the fact that the data collection for this study was mainly conducted through an online self-administered questionnaire survey, common methods of variance may also cause some issues. To reduce the likelihood of common method variances, participants are guaranteed that the collected data will be confidential, anonymous, and only used for research purposes. Participants are also required to answer all questions honestly, and there are no correct or incorrect answers to all questions. At the same time, the author also created an informed consent form, which detailed the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria for participants, content of participation in the study, risks and benefits of participants, privacy and data security, and a statement regarding the future use of research data.

Qualitative analysis is mainly conducted through semi-structured interviews, which involve strategies for Chinese PhD students to adapt to the multicultural background of life and learning in Malaysia, as well as open-ended questions about school service/support improvement. The specific interview content can be found in Table 1. The interview was conducted in a coffee shop next to the private university where the author is located. Due to the fact that it is a weekday, there are not many customers in the coffee shop, and the environment is elegant, which is very suitable for the interviewees to freely and easily accept the interview. Additionally, the research tools, information sheets, and consent forms have all been approved by the ethics committee of SEGI University.

3.2. Sample

The research location is a private university in Selangor, Malaysia, where the author is currently pursuing a PhD degree, which provides great convenience for contacting Chinese PhD students. At the time of this study, Chinese PhD students accounted for approximately 90% of the total number of PhD students at the private university.

After obtaining approval from the SEGI University ethics committee, the author immediately contacted the management personnel of the Graduate School of Business, who provided the contact information and basic information of 300 Chinese PhD students. After screening, a total of 120 potential study participants were identified, and an invitation letter was sent to them to participate in the study. In the sample, 70 students agreed to participate in the questionnaire survey, and 15 students agreed to accept on-site interviews.

The Chinese PhD students participating in the study come from different cities in China, such as Henan Province, Hebei Province, Beijing City, Liaoning Province, Fujian Province, Sichuan Province, Guizhou Province, Yunnan Province, etc., covering almost one-third of China's provinces and cities. English is not their first language. Nearly two-thirds of them have stopped learning and using English for many years. Half of them originally planned to complete their PhD degree online while taking advantage of COVID-19, but since the release of COVID-19 in 2023, the original plan has been completely broken.
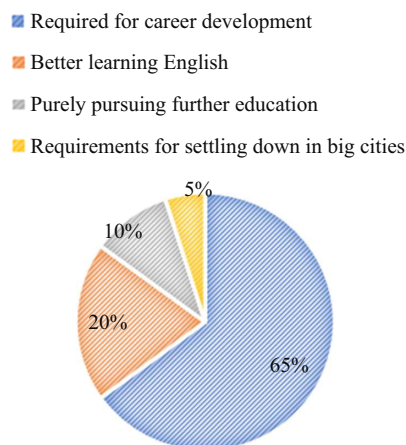
According to the author's survey statistics, there are currently three sources of Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia: university teachers, enterprise employees, and newly graduated master's students, with the majority being university teachers and enterprise employees. This also means that most Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia are not simply looking to improve their academic qualifications but are under pressure from the universities or companies they teach or work for, so they choose to travel thousands of miles to Malaysia to study even after working for several years. According to the survey data, it can be seen that the percentage of motivation required for career development is 65%. The reason is that the competition pressure on domestic universities and enterprises is relatively high. If one obtains a PhD degree, it undoubtedly increases the weight of winning in the competition and can obtain higher titles or positions; based on a motivational percentage of 20% for better learning English, as mentioned earlier, Malaysia is a very good country for improving English proficiency due to its multiculturalism and low tuition fees; the pure percentage of students pursuing a PhD degree in Malaysia is only 10%, due to the fact that the majority of students studying in Malaysia are already working or

Table 1
Specific interview content

Number	Question
01	Which city in China are you from?
02	What is your current professional qualification level at your previous employer?
03	What are your challenges in adapting to student life in Malaysia's multicultural context? What strategies do you adopt to accelerate adaptation?
04	What are your challenges in adapting to student learning in Malaysia's multicultural context? What strategies do you adopt to accelerate adaptation?
05	Do you have any good suggestions for Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia to help them adapt to the local society, culture, and learning as soon as possible, thereby promoting the integration of education?
06	Has your university taken any measures or services to help you adapt and promote educational integration while adapting to the multicultural background of Malaysia? If so, what are the specific measures or services?
07	From the perspective of a student, what other measures or services would you like to receive from your university to help you better adapt to the local society, culture, and learning, thereby promoting educational integration?
08	As a Chinese studying for a doctorate at a private university in Malaysia, do you have anything else to say about the educational integration in Malaysia's multicultural background?

working group members; the last 5% belong to a very small group of people who intend to settle down in first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai in China. Due to their developed economy and fierce competition, these first-tier cities are explicitly required to have a PhD degree or face other harsh conditions. Figure 2 shows the personal motivations of Chinese doctoral students choosing to study abroad in Malaysia.

Figure 2
Personal motivations of Chinese PhD students choosing to study abroad in Malaysia

- Required for career development
- Better learning English
- Purely pursuing further education
- Requirements for settling down in big cities

3.3. Data analysis

With the help of the "Wenjuanxing" platform, after participants complete the survey questions, each question will have corresponding data analysis. What's even more surprising is that the platform can also provide tables, pie charts, bar charts, bar charts, etc., for data analysis, which is very convenient. The author will also use SPSS to analyze quantitative questionnaire responses in order to generate descriptive statistics of the data. Conduct a thematic analysis on qualitative data based on deductive codes appearing in the literature and inductive codes based on repeated review of public statements in interview records. Then classify and cluster these codes into themes, which will be discussed in the following text. A dataset was generated by combining quantitative and qualitative data from interviews to provide an in-depth description of how Chinese international students studying for a PhD degree in Malaysia can successfully achieve educational integration in a multicultural context.

4. Results and Discussion

Educational integration, also known as integrated education or comprehensive education, is a model that accommodates all students and allows students of different types, characteristics, countries, and cultural backgrounds to receive education in the same educational environment [14]. Integrated education is not simply about bringing students together but requires educators to provide an inclusive educational environment where students can truly feel equality and respect [15]. At the same time, educators also need to develop personalized education plans tailored to the characteristics and needs of different students, helping them learn and grow better. Specifically, for Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia, the goal of educational integration should be to create an

environment and opportunities to promote their communication and understanding with local students and students from other countries, while quickly integrating into local society, in order to successfully complete their study abroad journey [2]. Next, evaluate the needs and characteristics of Chinese PhD students. The purpose of Chinese PhD students studying abroad is very clear, which is to successfully obtain a PhD degree in order to increase their promotion in their original workplace after returning to China. However, the vast majority of Chinese PhD students not only need to balance their studies and work but also need to take care of their families and children. Therefore, their burden is relatively heavy, and when they come to a foreign country, their language, food, culture, and customs are different from those in China, which further exacerbates the psychological pressure on Chinese PhD students. Therefore, professional teachers and courses are needed to soothe the hearts of Chinese PhD students. Malaysia's integration policies and practices in the field of education specifically include the following points:

First, Malaysia's education policy emphasizes diversity and inclusivity. The government is committed to establishing a new type of education system by formulating a series of education development plans and blueprints, such as the 2012 National Education Development Blueprint. This system aims to cultivate shared experiences and values among students through exposure to diversity, inclusive trust, religious tolerance, and interaction between students from different ethnicities. The implementation of this policy helps to create an inclusive and multicultural educational environment, enabling students from different backgrounds to coexist harmoniously and learn from each other [2].

Second, the Malaysian government has provided friendly visa policies for PhD international students, making it easier for them to enter Malaysia to study. Meanwhile, the cost of living in Malaysia is relatively low, especially for Chinese students. Similar dietary habits and cultural backgrounds make it easier for them to adapt to the new living environment.

Third, in teaching practice, Malaysia's education system places great emphasis on aligning with international standards, introducing many international teaching methods and concepts. This not only helps to improve the quality of education for PhD international students but also helps them better integrate into the globalized work environment after graduation.

The relationship between cultural background, education, and learning is complex, and some even artificially separate them. However, in this study, the issue of educational integration in a multicultural context was raised, followed by internal and external factors that affect educational integration. From the questionnaire results, it can be seen that Chinese PhD students exhibit high reliability in integrating education in a multicultural context. Although some of them have come to Malaysia many times since the closure of the COVID-19 epidemic, they have different learning and living adaptability to Malaysia with a multicultural background. Forty-two students expressed that they have fully or very well adapted, and whether it is studying or living, they are willing to stay in Malaysia and enjoy the time spent here. However, 10 students also expressed that even though they have come to Malaysia for the second or third time, due to their weak foundation in English speaking and listening, it is difficult to integrate into the local area, and they also find it difficult to adapt to Malaysia's food and climate. Therefore, every time they come to Malaysia, it is a torment. Regarding the integration of education among Chinese PhD students in a multicultural context, as revealed by on-site interviews, challenges are often a unique combination of individual problems faced by students, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Interview data on issues with adjustment to Chinese PhD students' life and learning

Names	Issues with adjustment to student life	Issues with adjustment to learning
Interviewee 1	No problem	Familiarize the local English accent
Interviewee 2	Unable to make foreign friends	No problem
Interviewee 3	My roommate is too noisy	Reasonably allocate one's time
Interviewee 4	No problem	Freedom, but poor self-discipline
Interviewee 5	No problem	No problem
Interviewee 6	Not very adapted to local food	Too much study pressure
Interviewee 7	Not very adapted to local culture	Difficulty in communicating in English
Interviewee 8	The local climate is too hot	No problem
Interviewee 9	Weak independent living ability	Meeting with supervisor is too difficult
Interviewee 10	Not very adapted to local culture	Supervisor guidance is not detailed enough
Interviewee 11	Will miss home and children in China	English listening is too weak
Interviewee 12	Not very adapted to local culture	Unable to obtain recognition from supervisor
Interviewee 13	Unable to make foreign friends	No problem
Interviewee 14	No problem	Too much study pressure
Interviewee 15	The cost of living is too high	Lack of spoken English vocabulary

Note: For the convenience of readers, all Chinese names in the table have been changed to numbers, from interviewee 1–15.

Among the 15 students interviewed on-site, only 4 students stated "no problem" in the "issues with adjustment to student life" section. The remaining 11 students presented diverse characteristics in the problem of "issues with adjustment to student life," such as "unable to make foreign friends," "roommates living together are too noisy," "not very adapted to local food and culture," "the local climate is too hot," "weak independent living ability," etc. In terms of "issues with adjustment to learning," only 4 students reported that the learning process was relatively smooth, while the remaining 11 students either had poor self-discipline or too much learning pressure, but the biggest and most common problem was still "language." The problem of "language" includes difficulty in familiarizing oneself with the local English accent, weak English listening skills, and a lack of spoken English vocabulary. This is exactly what was mentioned earlier: "Challenges are often a unique combination of problems that students face individually," with both common and individual issues.

4.1. The premise of educational integration: Adapting to local culture and society

The interview data indicate that general life, cultural, and social adjustments are the main challenges for Chinese PhD students to adapt to Malaysian life. Some issues are personal and beyond the control of the university, such as adapting to the weather and local food, planning study time, and overly missing family members, especially children, in China. Several issues that this study focuses more on are what Chinese PhD students at universities can influence or support, such as helping them adapt to Malaysia's multiculturalism, establishing new friendships with others, especially local students, and how to get along well with supervisors and graduate smoothly as soon as possible. The relationship between life and learning is complex, but at least one thing is clear – that is, to adapt to local life, one must first understand and adapt to the local culture. For example, after coming to Malaysia multiple times, interviewee 1 has gained a deeper understanding of Malaysia's culture.

She even takes the initiative to go online and watch documentaries about Malaysia's multiculturalism, because she can use this to understand the background of multiculturalism, such as why this country has become this way, how Malaysia's multicultural background was formed, and how foreigners can adapt to this multiculturalism. The specific cultural and social adaptation of Chinese PhD students to Malaysia is shown in Table 3.

According to Table 3, among the cultural and social factors that affect Chinese PhD students, "staying away from Chinese families and children," "communicating and making friends with locals," and "living with people of different skin colors" account for a relatively high proportion of "very difficult," ranking first at 54.2%, second at 50.0%, and third at 28.6%, respectively. This is mainly because most Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia are already married and have children, and the regret of not being able to take care of and accompany their families and children at home puts a certain psychological burden on them. Due to the differences in language and culture, as well as the heavy academic burden and short stay time, Chinese PhD students are accustomed to activities in smaller Chinese social circles and lose the opportunity to make friends with local people. Because they share the same language and eating habits, Chinese PhD students will also try to find roommates who are also Chinese residents to avoid inconvenience in life. In addition, the three items of "understanding Malaysia's multiculturalism," "being easily accepted by locals," and "allocating living expenses and time" account for a relatively low proportion in the "very difficult" aspect, all at 14.3%, indicating that Chinese PhD students have a consciousness of understanding Malaysia's multicultural background, but understanding is one thing, and doing is another. The overall social atmosphere in Malaysia is highly inclusive, with locals being more tolerant toward foreign students and tourists, which is why Malaysia is a country established by three different races. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of Chinese doctoral students studying in Malaysia are university teachers and corporate employees. Therefore, it is not a problem for adult office workers to allocate living expenses and time reasonably.

Table 3
Summary of issues concerning cultural and social factors of Chinese PhD students

Cultural and social issues	No problem	A bit difficult	Very difficult
Far away from family and children	10 (14.3%)	22 (31.4%)	38 (54.2%)
Communicate and make friends with locals	10 (14.3%)	25 (35.7%)	35 (50.0%)
Living with people of different skin colors	13 (18.6%)	37 (52.9%)	20 (28.6%)
Adapt to Malaysia's climate	36 (51.4%)	20 (28.6%)	14 (20.0%)
Adapt to Malaysia's food	32 (45.7%)	26 (37.1%)	12 (17.1%)
Understanding Malaysia's multiculturalism	15 (21.4%)	45 (64.3%)	10 (14.3%)
Being easily accepted by local people	40 (57.1%)	20 (28.6%)	10 (14.3%)
Allocate living expenses and time	50 (71.4%)	10 (14.3%)	10 (14.3%)

n = 70

4.2. The key to educational integration: Adapting to learning atmosphere and methods

For Chinese PhD students, the challenges of Malaysia's multiculturalism to smoothly integrate with education and learning are still quite daunting. The first thing to bear the brunt is language and cultural adaptation. Malaysia is a multicultural country that primarily uses Malay, English, and Mandarin. For Chinese PhD students who are not familiar with Malay and English, initial communication and adaptation may bring some difficulties. They need to work hard to improve their language skills in order to better adapt to the learning environment. At the same time, Malaysia's cultural customs and social norms may also differ from the backgrounds of international students, requiring a certain amount of time to understand, adapt, and integrate. The specific problems and challenges encountered by Chinese PhD students in their studies are shown in Table 4.

According to Table 4, due to significant differences in language, culture, and past educational experiences, Chinese PhD students have a relatively high proportion of problems and challenges in learning adaptation of "very difficult," with "understanding the teacher's accent," "adapting to the teacher's teaching style," and "understanding and meeting the teacher's expectations" ranking first at 42.9%, second at 28.6%, and third at 28.6%. From the feedback of 15 on-site interviewees, the vast majority of Indian and Malay teachers generally have local accents in their spoken English, and Chinese PhD students have difficulty understanding and often misunderstand the teacher's meaning and make jokes. Most Chinese teachers can speak Mandarin and, due to taking care of their students, speak Mandarin to them, which, to some extent,

alleviates language anxiety among Chinese PhD students. In addition, the three items of "being able to smoothly understand the course," "adapting to course evaluation methods," and "adapting to different learning methods" account for a relatively low proportion of "very difficult," at 22.9%, 17.1%, and 14.3%, respectively. Thanks to the diligent learning attitude of Chinese students since childhood, who preview the teacher's courseware before class, review the teacher's notes after class, and even repeatedly review the teacher's audio and video recordings during class, Chinese PhD students do not have major problems with course learning. As for learning methods and course evaluation methods, they are similar in the world, and artificial intelligence is so advanced that it also helps modern people greatly in their learning.

4.3. Strategies for successfully adapting to educational integration

Some Chinese PhD students who have successfully adapted to educational integration in Malaysia's multicultural context shared how they have adopted more proactive strategies to adapt to the difficulties and challenges they encounter and have persevered. These strategies specifically include investing time and effort to understand Malaysia's multiculturalism, finding more opportunities and time to go out and communicate with locals, actively contacting the supervisor and gaining their encouragement and recognition, and improving their English proficiency through various means. Among the 15 students interviewed on-site, 6 said they usually talk more to Chinese friends, 7 said they usually talk more to their families through video calls, and only 2 said they will try their best to find

Table 4
Summary of issues and challenges for Chinese PhD students in learning adaptation

Student learning issue	No problem	A bit difficult	Very difficult
Can understand the teacher's accent	15 (21.4%)	25 (35.7%)	30 (42.9%)
Adapt to the teacher's teaching style	30 (42.9%)	20 (28.6%)	20 (28.6%)
Understand and meet the teacher's expectations	15 (21.4%)	35 (50.0%)	20 (28.6%)
Can smoothly understand the course	20 (28.6%)	34 (48.6%)	16 (22.9%)
Adapt to course evaluation methods	33 (47.1%)	25 (35.7%)	12 (17.1%)
Adapt to different learning methods	33 (47.1%)	27 (38.9%)	10 (14.3%)

n = 70

opportunities to talk to their supervisor. However, it is worth noting that almost all respondents were very clear about why they came to Malaysia to pursue a PhD degree.

Interviewee 8 has been to Malaysia for the fourth time this year and has gained insights into how he can smoothly adapt to his study life. He has a clear career plan, which not only helps him stay focused and proactive for a long time but also serves as a reminder when he is slacking off. "Since I voluntarily chose to come to Malaysia, I must make myself happy here. If I want to have a happy life and successfully obtain a PhD degree, then let it be natural to integrate into the local community." Interviewee 4, interviewee 9, and interviewee 13 also mentioned the need to allocate time between study and life to ensure a healthy balance between study and leisure.

4.4. Overall situation and challenges of Chinese PhD students

Chinese PhD international students have a rich and profound understanding of Malaysia's educational integration. First, they generally feel the diversity and inclusiveness of education in Malaysia. As a multicultural country, Malaysia's education system also fully embodies this characteristic. On Malaysian campuses, Chinese PhD students have the opportunity to communicate and learn with classmates and teachers from different races and cultural backgrounds [24, 26]. This cross-cultural exchange not only broadens their horizons but also allows them to have a deeper understanding of multicultural values. Second, Chinese PhD students appreciate the internationalization trend in Malaysia's educational integration. Malaysia's education system actively introduces internationally advanced educational concepts and teaching methods, striving to improve the quality of education.

This enables Chinese PhD students to learn in an international teaching environment, be exposed to cutting-edge academic research results, and improve their academic level.

However, in Malaysia's learning and life, Chinese PhD students also face some cultural differences and language barriers. Chinese students and Malaysian students have significant cultural differences, with Chinese students preferring independent thinking and Malaysian students preferring collective thinking. Chinese students place more emphasis on learning, while Malaysian students place more emphasis on socializing. Chinese students value etiquette more, while Malaysian students are more tolerant. The official language of Malaysia is Malay, and in the field of higher education, especially in the doctoral stage, English is usually the primary language for teaching and research. For Chinese PhD students who are not native English speakers, it means that they must adapt to and be proficient in English for academic communication, paper writing, and classroom discussions. This includes understanding complex academic terminology, reading English literature, participating in English seminars, etc., with high language requirements. Although English is the primary language of higher education in Malaysia, locals may use Malay or other local languages more frequently in their daily lives. This may lead to language barriers for international students when communicating with locals in their daily lives, especially in social activities outside of campus. This language difference may affect the social experience and cultural adaptation process of international students, thereby reducing the experience of Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion of the study

The findings of this small-scale study have added to the perspective of Chinese students studying for a PhD degree at private universities in Malaysia: their adaptation to learning and society is complex, and Malaysia's multicultural background has both positive and negative aspects for them to adapt to local learning and life and achieve educational integration smoothly. However, from the Malaysian government to private universities, they are all making efforts to help Chinese PhD students accelerate their adaptation to the local culture and language, thereby promoting educational integration in Malaysia's multicultural context, and have achieved some results. For example, the education department strives to create an inclusive, open, and diverse educational environment by formulating educational policies, improving teaching methods, and enriching curriculum content. This educational environment encourages students to engage with, understand, and respect different cultures, cultivating their cross-cultural communication skills and global perspectives. This not only promotes communication and cooperation among students but also cultivates their team spirit and innovation ability. However, educational integration in a multicultural context also faces some challenges. How to find a balance between different cultures and ensure educational quality and equity will be the focus of further research by scholars in the future. In the future, Malaysia needs to continue to strengthen research and practice in multicultural education, explore more effective educational methods and strategies, in order to address these challenges and promote the sustainable development of education. Meanwhile, attracting more and more outstanding Chinese students to study in Malaysia.

5.2. Implications

The results of this small-scale study provide insights into how institutions and universities can take on the responsibility of supporting international students. In addition, there are some suggestions for promoting educational integration in a multicultural context, specifically:

First, deepen the concept and practice of integrating multicultural education. Malaysia's education system should further clarify and emphasize the importance of multicultural education, integrating it into all aspects of education. At the same time, by organizing multicultural activities and courses, students have the opportunity to be exposed to and understand different cultures, cultivating their understanding and respect for multiculturalism. Private universities can not only strengthen communication and cooperation among students from different cultural backgrounds on campus, such as setting up interest groups and research teams but also actively contacting other universities to organize cross-campus activities [2].

Second, strengthen cross-cultural communication and cooperation. Malaysian educational institutions can actively seek cooperation with international educational institutions, carry out teacher–student exchange programs, and provide students with broader perspectives and opportunities. In addition, encourage students to engage in cross-cultural group discussions and collaborations in the classroom, and cultivate their cross-cultural communication skills and teamwork spirit.

Furthermore, enhancing teachers' ability in multicultural education. Teachers are the key force in educational integration, and they should possess knowledge and skills in cross-cultural

education. Therefore, Malaysia should strengthen the training and education of teachers, enhance their multicultural education literacy, and enable them to better guide and assist students. Especially for teachers who serve as doctoral supervisors, they have the closest and most frequent contact with students and should fully leverage the bridging role of doctoral supervisors. By communicating with doctoral supervisors, students can not only learn the research theories and methods that the Malaysian academic community excels at but also experience the supervisor's attitude and practice toward the integration of different cultural education up close [2].

Finally, pay attention to balance and fairness. In promoting multicultural education, it is important to ensure that all cultures are treated equally and to avoid bias or discrimination against any particular culture. At the same time, attention should be paid to the educational needs of different groups, ensuring fair distribution of educational resources and enabling every student to fully develop in a multicultural environment.

5.3. Limitations of the study

The scope of this small-scale study is limited to a private university in Malaysia, with a relatively small sample size. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other private or public universities. This study only targets Chinese PhD students studying in Malaysia. In fact, many students studying in Malaysia not only come from China but also from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and other countries. These students also face the challenge of adapting to local learning and life and integrating into education in a multicultural context. However, these students are not within the scope of this study, and we can only hope that future researchers can fill this gap.

Ethical Statement

The research tools, information sheets, and consent forms have all been approved by the ethics committee of SEGI University. All participants of the study provided their written consent before participating in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Education Malaysia Global Service Centre at https://educationmalaysia.gov.my/more/student-data/international-student-data.

Author Contribution Statement

Xiujuan Zhang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

References

[1] Education Malaysia Global Service Centre. (2024). *Statistics on international student applications for Malaysia's tertiary education*. Retrieved from: https://educationmalaysia.gov.my/more/student-data/international-student-data

[2] Deni, A. R., Tumar, A., Houghton, A. M., & Crosling, G. M. (2021). Is all well? Academically successful international students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *35*(3), 655–667. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-07-2019-0259

[3] Abdullah, M. N. L. Y., & Abdullah, A. C. (2018). Preschool Teachers' training and attitudes towards multicultural education in Malaysia. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education and Care*, *7*, 1–13.

[4] Roos, L., Löfström, E., & Remmik, M. (2021). Individual and structural challenges in doctoral education: An ethical perspective. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *16*, 211. https://doi.org/10.28945/4738

[5] Ma, L. P. F. (2021). Writing in English as an additional language: Challenges encountered by doctoral students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *40*(6), 1176–1190. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1809354

[6] Ratri, D. P., Widiati, U., Astutik, I., & Jonathan, P. M. (2024). A systematic review on the integration of local culture into English language teaching in Southeast Asia: Current practices and impacts on learners' attitude and engagement. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, *14*(2), 37–44. https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.14.02.05

[7] Kanoksilapatham, B. (2020). Local culture preservation through Southern Thainess-based English lessons. *KEMANUSIAAN: The Asian Journal of Humanities*, *27*(2), 179–199. https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2020.27.2.10

[8] AlQbailat, N. M., Hicham, K. B., & Qattam, M. F. A. (2023). Barriers of culture integration into distance EFL teaching: Teachers' perspectives. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *13*(10), 2663–2671. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1310.25

[9] Kanoksilapatham, B., & Suranakkharin, T. (2018). Celebrating local, going global: Use of northern Thainess-based English lessons. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, *15*(2), 292. http://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2018.15.2.3.292

[10] Sheridan, R., Tanaka, K. M., & Hogg, N. (2019). Foreign language, local culture: How familiar contexts impact learning and engagement. *Tesl-Ej*, *23*(1), 1–27.

[11] Corcelles, M., Cano, M., Liesa, E., González-Ocampo, G., & Castelló, M. (2019). Positive and negative experiences related to doctoral study conditions. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(5), 922–939. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1602596

[12] Cornér, S., & Pyhältö, K. (2019). Supervisors' perceptions of primary resources and challenges of the doctoral journey. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *31*(3), 365–377.

[13] Cornwall, J., Mayland, E. C., van der Meer, J., Spronken-Smith, R. A., Tustin, C., & Blyth, P. (2019). Stressors in early-stage doctoral students. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *41*(3), 363–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1534821

[14] Yunus, R. M. (2022). Educational integration of refugee children in Malaysia: A scoping review. *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies*, *4*(2), 4–27. https://doi.org/10.2979/jems.2022.a896972

[15] Cerna, L. (2019). Refugee education: Integration models and practices in OECD countries. *OECD Education Working Papers, No. 203*, OECD Publishing.

[16] Ratminingsih, N. M., Budasi, I. G., & Kurnia, W. D. A. (2020). Local culture-based storybook and its effect on reading competence. *International Journal of Instruction*, *13*(2), 253–268.

[17] Suryani, A., Soedarso, S., Diani, K. T., & Rosmawati, R. (2020). English teaching in social and cultural contexts: Language teachers as cultural managers. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, *23*(2), 273–293.

[18] Yektiningtyas, W., & Ginting, J. P. B. (2020). Utilizing Sentani folktales to teach speaking for children of communal agents in Jayapura regency, Papua. *JOALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literature)*, *5*(2), 255–270. https://doi.org/10.33369/joall.v5i2.11554

[19] Sandrasegaran, K., & Rambeli, N. (2024). Globalization and higher education in Malaysia. *International Business Education Journal*, *17*(2), 1–11.

[20] Malakolunthu, S., & Rengasamy, N. C. (2012). Education policies and practices to address cultural diversity in Malaysia: Issues and challenges. *Prospects*, *42*(2), 147–159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-012-9227-9

[21] Munusamy, M. M., & Hashim, A. (2019). Internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia: Insights from higher education administrators. *AEI Insights*, *5*(1), 21–39. http://mjs.um.edu.my/index.php/AEIINSIGHTS/article/view/31647

[22] Nawi, M. Z. M. (2021). Perkembangan dan cabaran institusi pengajian tinggi di Malaysia: Suatu pemerhatian awal. [The development and challenges of higher learning institutions in Malaysia: An initial observation.]. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *6*(6), 169–177. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v6i6.808

[23] Pi, X. M., Azam, S. F., Haur, F. C., & Khatibi, A. (2020). Factors influencing the intention and decision of Chinese high school students to study at Higher education institutions in Malaysia. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *7*(2), 289–304.

[24] Muftahu, M., Annmali, D., & H, X. L. (2023). Massification of higher education in Malaysia: Managing institutional equity and diversity. *Asian Journal of University Education*, *19*(2), 352–364. https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v19i2.22234

[25] Lloyd, M. L. (1991). Multiculturalism: Hong Kong and elsewhere. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, *62*(9), 51–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1991.10604060

[26] Wan, C. D., Sirat, M., & Razak, D. A. (2020). Academic governance and leadership in Malaysia: Examining the national higher education strategic initiatives. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, *9*(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.14425/jice.2020.9.2.0913