

Article

Perceptions of Chinese Students Regarding Academic Support Provided by Spanish Universities: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This research aims to understand Chinese international students' perceptions of the academic support provided by Spanish universities. It explores students' feedback on their participation in such support, its perceived effectiveness, and their expectations and needs. Drawing from a hybrid sociocultural framework, this study employed a qualitative research design, conducting semi-structured interviews to collect data from 14 Chinese postgraduate students at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to uncover key themes related to the students' experiences with the academic support system. The findings reveal that, although UAB offers various forms of academic support, both participation in, and the perceived effectiveness of, these provisions remain limited. Chinese students encounter challenges such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with the academic support system, and varying attitudes from faculty. The findings highlight a need for more practical and systematic academic writing and speaking courses, as well as culturally sensitive and internationalised support mechanisms. As a practical implication, the study suggests that universities should prioritise "situational" oral communication training that prepares students for active classroom participation and implement proactive outreach strategies, such as engaging departmental coordinators to directly promote available library and digital resources, thereby overcoming the current lack of student awareness. This study contributes to addressing a gap in the literature by providing empirical insights into the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students regarding academic support in Spain. It offers recommendations for UAB and other Spanish institutions to enhance their academic support systems, promoting a more inclusive and international environment for international students.

Keywords: academic support; Chinese international students; Spanish universities; higher education; internationalisation; hybrid sociocultural framework; students' perceptions



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1. Introduction

Since the 2012–2013 academic year, the number of international students in Spain has increased dramatically, with postgraduate enrolments having tripled ([Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, 2024](#)). Chinese students have been the largest group of international students enrolled in Spanish public universities since 2016 ([Ministerio de Universidades, 2022](#)). Given that international students contribute intellectual, cultural, and economic benefits to host countries ([Martirosyan et al., 2019](#); [Melguizo-Garde & Yetano, 2021](#)), scholars suggest that universities should provide tailored solutions to address

students' diverse needs within a framework of inclusion and empowerment (González-Gil et al., 2016).

Academic support positively impacts the learning experience of international students (Cong & Glass, 2019; King et al., 2021). Unlike conventional classroom settings, academic support offers skills, prompt feedback, and a low-risk learning environment (Voisin et al., 2023). However, such support does not automatically enhance students' learning experiences unless it encourages active participation and ensures effectiveness. Unlike the US, Spanish institutions adopt a decentralised, collaborative approach in which multiple departments share the responsibility for supporting international students (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016). Additionally, Spanish universities are often unprepared to meet the academic support needs of a growing number of international students, which may lead to feelings of isolation due to insufficient institutional support, although the specifics of students' perceptions remain unknown (Bakay, 2023; Torralba et al., 2012). In English-speaking countries, some international students perceive their unfamiliarity with and difficulty in accessing various support services as significant hindrances to their academic performance (Ajayi, 2022). Despite universities' efforts to promote support, it is often underutilised by those who could benefit the most (Hoynes & McNaught, 2013).

Participation in and effectiveness of academic support significantly influence learning experiences. There is ongoing debate about whether university support meets Chinese students' needs (Moon et al., 2020; Wolf & Phung, 2019), and concerns about the suitability of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches (Ballo et al., 2019). Studies emphasise the importance of listening to students (Jeffery & Johnson, 2019), but few studies discuss students' views on support. Roberts et al. (2015) describe the views of international students regarding support services in Australia, and the phenomenographic study of Mimirinis et al. (2024) explores variation in Black students' conceptions of support in British higher education. Further insights come from the exploration of students' learning experiences (Ajayi, 2022; Bakay, 2023; Moon et al., 2020; Torralba et al., 2012; Wolf & Phung, 2019).

This study aims to explore in depth the perceptions of Chinese postgraduate students regarding the academic support provided by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (hereafter, UAB) in Spain. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the feedback from Chinese international students regarding the participation and effectiveness of academic support provided by UAB?
2. What are the expectations and needs of Chinese international students regarding the academic support provided by UAB?

Chinese international students in Spain

Over the past two decades, Spain has implemented policies to attract international students, although its level of internationalisation is not among the highest globally (Cámara de Comercio de España, 2023). The agreement on the recognition of academic degrees and diplomas between China and Spain, signed in 2007 (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, 2007), was a significant milestone, facilitating Chinese students' entry into the Spanish University System. Recently, Spain launched a shock plan to improve the processing of international students' qualifications (Ministerio de Universidades, 2022), thereby demonstrating Spain's ambition to attract international students.

Data from the General Secretariat for Universities in Spain show a significant increase in Chinese international students, with over 10,000 students entering the system annually in the past five years, and female students outnumbering male students at a ratio of approximately 1.5 to 1. Since the 2016–2017 academic year, Chinese students have formed the largest international group in Spanish public university degree programmes, in contrast to European and North American students' mobility preferences (Secretaría General de Universidades, 2023).

Research on Chinese students in non-English-speaking countries like Spain remains sparse. [Jing et al. \(2020\)](#) note that most research on international students was driven by scholars in English-speaking countries. In Spain, limited studies ([Fuentes Agustí et al., 2022](#); [Lin et al., 2016](#); [Zhu, 2022](#)) focus on Chinese students' learning experiences, mainly on 'cultural shock' ([Oberg, 1960](#)) and cross-cultural adaptation challenges. Building on foundational work by [Loomis and Schuler \(1948\)](#), subsequent research has identified factors like self-efficacy ([A. Li & Gasser, 2005](#)), self-determined motivation ([V. Chirkov et al., 2007](#); [V. I. Chirkov et al., 2008](#)), and social support ([Jou & Fukada, 1995](#)) as crucial to adaptation. [Lin et al. \(2016\)](#) identify language ability, teacher–student relationships, and the new education system as significant challenges for Chinese doctoral students. [Fuentes Agustí et al. \(2022\)](#) report positive perceptions of Chinese students among Spanish peers.

Current research lacks an in-depth exploration of institutional support from the students' perspective, especially for Chinese graduate students ([Melguizo-Garde & Yetano, 2021](#)). To advance the internationalisation of Spanish universities, it is essential to gain a clearer understanding of Chinese students' perceptions, assess existing academic support, and identify areas for improvement.

Academic support and academic help-seeking behaviour

In the context of universities seeking to internationalise and attract a more diverse student body, academic support plays a key role in enhancing student retention and graduation rates, thereby improving institutional reputation ([Reader, 2018](#)). Academic support is a contested concept. [Bornschlegl et al. \(2020\)](#) define it as encompassing a range of services to ensure students acquire the academic skills necessary for academic success, tailored to their backgrounds. In contrast to earlier support systems criticised by [Jacklin and Le Riche \(2009\)](#), which framed the diverse backgrounds of minority students as a deficit, current support is accessible to all students ([Martirosyan et al., 2019](#)). In Australia, academic support for international students focuses on written and study skills because of their direct impact on assessment ([B. Li et al., 2022](#)). In the US, support includes writing centres consultants, English language programmes, student tutoring, advising and counselling and professional development workshops ([Martirosyan et al., 2019](#)).

In discussing the process of students using academic support provided by their institutions, including from decision to action, the term 'academic help-seeking' is widely used in the literature to denote participation in support aimed at improving academic performance ([Wimer & Levant, 2011](#)). Factors such as gender, age, culture, socioeconomic status, previous help-seeking experiences, educational background, and personality have been shown to influence academic help-seeking behaviour ([Bornschlegl et al., 2020](#)). However, these factors reflect trends and may be challenged by research.

For instance, [Brownson et al. \(2014\)](#), [Cheng et al. \(2018\)](#), [Choi and Miller \(2014\)](#), and [Kam et al. \(2019\)](#) found that Asian students are generally less willing or less likely to seek help. Conversely, [Frey and Roysircar \(2006\)](#) found a positive relationship between cultural adaptation and help-seeking among South Asians, but not East Asians. [Yakunina and Weigold \(2011\)](#) and [Al-Krenawi et al. \(2009\)](#) found no significant relationship between cultural background and academic help-seeking. This variability suggests that the determinants of help-seeking may depend on specific individuals and contexts, highlighting the need to understand these dynamics in depth.

Theoretical framework: hybrid sociocultural framework

Recent research indicates that international students' academic success depends heavily on the support they receive from universities, especially when that support is visible, accessible, and coordinated. The meta-analysis conducted by [Sari et al. \(2026\)](#) found a strong positive relationship between social support and academic adjustment, with institu-

tional support playing an especially important role in helping international students adapt to university expectations and perform well academically. These findings suggest that institutional support is a central factor in students' transition to higher education and their ability to manage academic demands. Earlier work by [Martirosyan et al. \(2019\)](#) similarly highlights that many U.S. universities do provide services such as tutoring, academic advising, and language support, but these services are not always clearly communicated or easy to access. This is significant because students may not benefit from support that exists on paper but is difficult to find or use in practice. This underscores the need for universities to adopt more proactive, culturally responsive, and user-friendly approaches to support provision.

Compared to international students from Latin America and Europe, in Spain, Chinese international students tend to experience greater challenges related to language and academic culture ([Fuentes Agustí et al., 2022](#); [Zhu, 2022](#)). This study draws on [Heng's \(2016\)](#) hybrid sociocultural framework to analyse the complexity of Chinese students' perceptions of academic support, with particular attention to the interaction between students and their sociocultural environment. This framework, focusing on Chinese student mobility, addresses coping strategies for academic challenges ([Heng, 2018a](#)), heterogeneity ([Heng, 2019](#)), expectations of institutional communities in the United States ([Heng, 2019](#)), and learning experiences ([Dai, 2021](#); [Heng, 2018b](#); [Wang, 2019](#)).

The framework integrates concepts from anthropological, psychological, and postmodern studies of culture and education, distilled into three tenets ([Abu-Lugbod, 1991](#); [Eisenhart, 2001](#); [Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003](#); [González et al., 2005](#); [Rogoff, 2003](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)).

1. Humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts.
2. Humans participate in more than one sociocultural context, and their participation, motivations, attitudes, and behaviours change across contexts and over time.
3. Humans possess agency in improvising, interacting and contesting contextual sociocultural values, beliefs, and behaviours. ([Heng, 2016](#), p. 24)

[Heng \(2016, 2019\)](#) elaborates further on these tenets. The first tenet asserts that human learning, development, and behaviour are interconnected with the sociocultural environment, influenced by historical shifts ([Rogoff, 2003](#)). For Chinese students, this includes the influence of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and the modern societal emphasis on self-respect, respect for hierarchy, age, and interpersonal relationships ([Yum, 1988](#)). These influences may contribute to "academic culture shock" due to unfamiliarity with the host country's culture, education system, and academic language ([Hung & Hyun, 2010](#)).

The second tenet emphasises that the processes of learning, development, and behaviour in an individual are shaped by a constellation of experiences ([Abu-Lugbod, 1991](#); [Erickson, 2011](#); [Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003](#)). The tendency to overlook the internal heterogeneity among Chinese international students, including their diverse economic, political, ethnic, and epistemic backgrounds and beliefs ([Liu et al., 2022](#)) and the overemphasis on the enduring nature of their difficulties ([Heng, 2020](#)) resulted in neglect of the dynamic perspective.

The third tenet is aligned with the view that individuals are "active possessors" of their social structure ([Willis, 1981](#), p. 175).

Building on the hybrid sociocultural framework ([Heng, 2016](#)), this study recognises the influence of cultural background on Chinese students' experiences, highlighting the dynamics and complexity of individual experiences and pointing out the subjective agency and perceptions of Chinese students in Spanish higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This research employs qualitative methods to explore Chinese international students’ perceptions of academic support in Spanish higher education. The qualitative approach provides an in-depth understanding of attitudes, intentions and behaviours (Cohen & Morrison, 2017), making it suitable for examining complex learning experiences.

Data were collected over four months (March to July 2024) using semi-structured interviews at UAB. A pilot interview was carried out to refine the questions. The formal interviews, conducted face-to-face and online, included clear examples of different types of support to aid participants’ understanding and incorporated demographic and open-ended questions on awareness, usefulness, usage, access barriers, satisfaction, expectations, and needs of academic support. Prompts like “why” and “please give examples” were used to elicit detailed responses. All interviews were conducted in Chinese. Interviews were conducted in a mixed format (face-to-face and online) with durations ranging between 30 and 60 min. Interviews were transcribed in Chinese, and participants reviewed their notes for accuracy using the member-checking approach (Patton, 2002).

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The public university UAB, with 13 teaching centres, had the highest QS ranking in Spain in 2023/2024. Located in Catalonia, the Spanish region with the highest proportion of international students (Ministerio de Universidades, 2022), the region has two official languages: Spanish and Catalan, the latter being the official language of the public school system (Bernaus et al., 2007).

UAB’s academic support includes activities, plans, projects, resources, and services to ensure students’ successful completion of studies, as defined by Bornschlegl et al. (2020). Based on the scope of support provided, this study categorises academic support into two categories. The first category, ‘UAB’s academic support closely associated with teaching programmes (Table 1)’ refers to support within the teaching centres (faculties and colleges). The second category, ‘Academic support services provided by UAB (Table 2)’ includes support available to all UAB students. The academic support provided by UAB is available to all students, with no differentiation between domestic and international students.

Table 1. UAB’s academic support policies closely associated with teaching programmes (UAB, n.d.).

Type	Content
Consultation	Academic counselling from application to study period.
Introduction	Previous general introduction to the school and the programme.
Professional lecture	Various lectures with expert knowledge.
After-class tutoring	Personalised academic tutoring is provided by the faculty.
Professional practice	Activities to enhance the understanding and application of professional knowledge

UAB has a high proportion of international postgraduate students (44.4%) (UAB, 2023). According to the UAB Data Governance Office (UAB, 2024), 216 Chinese international students (156 females and 60 males) were enrolled in master’s programmes across 12 teaching centres during the 2023/2024 academic year. They were primarily enrolled in programmes taught in Spanish and English.

A sample of fourteen volunteer participants, selected through purposive sampling from 10 teaching centres, participated in the study, reflecting the overall gender ratio and program distribution. The participants, aged 23 to 28, included three male and eleven female students, with varied academic backgrounds. All moved from China to Spain to

pursue their studies at UAB. The sample size was based on Guest et al.'s (2006) findings on data saturation in studies employing approximately twelve purposive interviews. Table 3 shows the profiles of research participants.

Table 2. Academic support services provided by UAB, according to its websites.

Type	Content
Language services	Multichannel language learning courses, Catalan language exchange activities, online language self-study centre.
Disability and specific educational needs support service	Facilitate academic support and success through tutorials and promote employment opportunities by leveraging university community synergies.
Library service	Loan service, work and study spaces, innovation spaces, training and skills support, support for teaching and research, library IT services and consultation.
Lecture	Lectures on a wide range of topics.
Supplementary courses	In-person courses and massive open online courses (MOOCs) in a range of fields

Table 3. Research participants' profiles ¹.

Participant	Interview Date	Language Level	Field of Study	Age	Gender	Time Living in Spain (In Months)	Time in the Master's Programme (In Months)
A	03/2024	Spanish B2	Education	23	Male	5	5
B	03/2024	Spanish C1	Law	28	Male	6	6
C	03/2024	Spanish B2	Social science	28	Female	97	6
D	03/2024	Spanish B2	Business	27	Female	26	6
E	04/2024	Spanish C1	Translation	24	Female	33	7
F	04/2024	Spanish B2	Social science	23	Female	7	6
G	04/2024	Spanish B2	Language Spanish	24	Female	7	7
H	04/2024	English B2	Bioscience	23	Female	6	6
I	04/2024	English B2	Engineering	25	Male	7	7
J	04/2024	Spanish B2	Psychology	24	Female	7	6
K	05/2024	English C1	Veterinary medicine	25	Female	7	7
L	05/2024	English C1	Engineering	24	Female	5	5
M	06/2024	English B2	Economic	24	Female	7	7
N	06/2024	Spanish C1	Education	24	Female	9	8

¹ Language levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Levels indicate proficiency in Spanish for programmes taught in Spanish and proficiency in English for programmes taught in English. To protect participants' identities, the field of study is indicated instead of the specific degree they are pursuing.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide for thematic analysis, which offers a flexible and systematic framework to analyse complex qualitative data. Chinese-speaking data was manually coded, and themes were categorised from transcribed Chinese interview records. After three rounds of analysis conducted over time, the final themes were determined. Across these rounds, a process of peer review was implemented, involving two members of the research team. During this process, the researchers jointly examined the emerging codes and themes in order to identify those topics most closely aligned with Heng's (2016) overarching theoretical framework, as well as with the body of literature discussed in the theoretical section. This collaborative approach contributed to reducing potential bias associated with individual analysis.

3. Results

This section outlines the main findings from the semi-structured interviews and focuses on Chinese international students' perceptions of academic support at UAB. It is

organised into two parts: first, feedback from Chinese international students regarding the academic support provided by UAB, and second, their expectations and needs regarding that support. Together, these two subsections highlight how students experience the current support system and what they perceive to be lacking or in need of improvement.

3.1. Feedback from Chinese International Students Regarding the Academic Support Provided by UAB

Although the organisational structure of academic support in Spain differs from that in English-speaking countries (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016), the evaluations by Chinese students also reflect differentiation (Moon et al., 2020; Wolf & Phung, 2019).

Many participants related the academic support provided by UAB positively (A; B; C; E; G; H; J; K; L; N). However, those participants (D; M; F; I) who expressed negative experiences during their studies rated academic support as neutral or negative. These negative experiences were from teacher–student relationships (Lin et al., 2016); social support (Jou & Fukada, 1995); dissatisfaction with the inclusivity support; finding the teaching content and quality below their expectations; and being unable to obtain effective support from the university.

Consultation and introduction: professional lectures provided by the teaching centres are the academic supports that participants are most familiar with and that are integrated into the students' daily curriculum, so participation is high. All participants were aware of the professional practice, but when the practice was optional, the students did not participate very much. They reported that the opportunities offered by the school "required knowledge of Catalan (D; M; N)". Regarding after-class tutoring, most students preferred to email their teachers after class for academic help-seeking, communicating in written form because of worries about language (Lin et al., 2016), especially since they had positive feedback from a series of tutoring sessions for graduation papers.

The teacher–student relationships (Lin et al., 2016) and social support (Jou & Fukada, 1995) influenced the students' feedback and left a deep impression on them. Despite some complaints about the response times, they believed that these supports had a positive impact on their entire academic career. The term "Patient" was frequently used by participants. K is the only student in this study who gave a full point rating, praising tutorial support.

I couldn't understand anything for the first three months. Our teachers gave me a lot of support, which was very warm. . . Almost every teacher would come to me and ask me what I did not understand, and ask me to email them after class to continue learning. . . During that time, I asked questions that even a three-year-old would understand, but the teachers were very patient. (K)

Apart from teacher–student relationships (Lin et al., 2016) and social support (Jou & Fukada, 1995), students' prior help-seeking experiences and individual personality traits (Bornschlegel et al., 2020) also influenced the use of academic support provided by UAB. In one case, the negative experience led a student with language scores that satisfied the admission criteria for the programme to rely on self-study or to seek assistance from peers whenever the participant M encountered difficulties throughout the academic programme.

When I first arrived, my English was not very fluent. After communicating just a few words with the coordinator, I was questioned about my ability to complete my studies. . . I feel like I need help, but I am worried about encountering the same situation again. (M)

The behaviour of M may be interpreted as a form of silent resistance, while another student, whose speaking ability was similarly questioned, chose to accept this treatment.

When we first started school, it was a bit difficult for us to follow the lessons. The teacher said that you should not be sitting here. . . But I came here as a foreigner to study, and some teachers think that if you come here to study, you must pass the language barrier. I do not feel isolated, and I can accept it. This kind of situation is rare. (I)

Neither of the two students who had unpleasant experiences with academic support providers reported offering any feedback. Under the influence of the philosophy of harmony, Chinese students respect their teachers as a higher authority in the Chinese context and are willing to maintain harmonious relationships within the educational context (Yum, 1988).

Even students who use the required academic support services express concern that frequent requests for assistance may be perceived negatively by teaching staff.

I sometimes email quite frequently, . . . I want to ask some professional questions. I really want to graduate successfully, and although the teacher may not like my behavior, I still must ask for help. (I)

The level of engagement with academic support among students from different teaching centres largely depends on faculty intervention. For instance, for graduate students who require literature search skills, the online search engine provided by the UAB library is an essential academic support resource. However, there are significant variations in how students utilise these resources: “I know it through systematic guidance lectures organized by departmental coordinators with library staff (C)”, “I discover it through Xiaohongshu (Chinese social media app) (D)”, while one participant undertaking a research programme reported not knowing how to use these resources during the thesis-writing phase, which significantly hindered learning efficiency.

At the same time, from the experience of M, the study found that this finding aligns with the concerns of some institutions that the more support students need, the less they use the support (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013). Participants generally understood the support categories, but not the details.

I have not heard of an online library. . . I just use Google Scholar. . . I cannot access and download some very important articles. . . I plan to ask my Chinese classmates. (M)

Economics may influence students’ academic help-seeking behaviour (Bornschlegl et al., 2020). All participants knew about UAB Languages, but only one had taken a free Catalan course. The others did not apply for language support because they did not need it, they were too busy, or the Spanish courses were not free.

Participants’ awareness of PIUNE and supplementary courses provided by UAB was relatively low. The former can be attributed to an objective lack of demand, while the latter can be understood as a waste of resources due to a lack of relevant knowledge and publicity. Chinese students appeared to be unfamiliar with the wide range of learning resources available to them, such as MOOCs provided by universities, which were unfamiliar to them. This low level of participation due to a lack of awareness suggests the need for the departments or educational institutions responsible for implementing these initiatives to provide solutions.

This study also found that predicting the effectiveness and efficiency of academic support influenced students’ participation. When asked why they did not use certain academic support that they knew about, the main response was “I do not have the need.” However, when asked how they would solve a learning problem, many participants said that they would prefer to ask their classmates or use artificial intelligence, which they

thought would be more efficient. Students cannot provide constructive feedback on the effectiveness of their experiences when they are not involved.

Additionally, when communicating with teaching staff or other departmental staff by email, the Chinese students interviewed generally expressed concern that the relevant academic support was not efficient due to uncertainty about the response time.

I think the biggest difficulty is that the teacher does not reply to my emails very often, so the plan has been delayed. I could have started my internship two months earlier, but the teacher never replied to my emails, so I am only starting my internship now. (F)

Participants were more aware of the academic support provided by the teaching centre, while their awareness of the more general support provided by UAB was influenced by the intervention of teaching staff and self-motivation. As a result of this trend, their positive feedback on the effectiveness of teaching support was also closely linked to their field of study. Meanwhile, the organisation and presentation by the teaching centre, the attitude of the faculty, previous experience of asking for help, personal needs, the prediction of the effectiveness, and the efficiency of the support response appear to influence participation in academic support for Chinese students. In addition, Chinese students' respect for their teachers influences their psychology when using academic support.

3.2. Expectations and Needs of Chinese International Students Regarding the Academic Support Provided by UAB

Supporting the findings of Lin et al. (2016) on the academic challenges of Chinese doctoral students in Spain, the challenges of the participants in this study were also focused on language ability, teacher–student relationships, and the new education system. The participants' needs were primarily categorised into two main areas: academic writing and Spanish or English oral communication in an academic context. Additionally, they expressed expectations regarding the need to increase awareness of the existing support and to develop a more international and culturally inclusive academic support system.

Due to unfamiliarity with new academic rules, systematic academic writing courses were identified as a key need for Chinese students and the broader student population (J; M; N). Meanwhile, this demand is not unique to Chinese students.

Thesis writing. . . the requirements during my undergraduate studies were completely different from here, and the citation format. . . I only learned from my classmates that APA format was required here, while a different format was used in China. (J)

Academic standards here were very strict, and we could easily cross the line. . . I hoped more seminars and guidance courses on academic writing could be offered. . . I thought it should be for all students because my Dutch classmates also engaged in academic misconduct. (M)

As discussed above, UAB provides online supplementary courses covering academic writing, but students' needs are still not being met. This shows that there is room for improvement in the promotion of academic support.

Every participant indicated that the teaching methods in Spanish universities place greater emphasis on interaction between teachers and students; therefore, oral language courses (English or Spanish) that focused on academic contexts were considered suitable for non-native students (J; I; G; E).

I hope that UAB can offer a one-month short-term language training course. It aims to help us integrate more smoothly into classroom participation and adapt quickly. . . As recent graduates, we have not had much experience communicating

with foreigners. . . The training provided by the school was more scenario-based and practical. (G)

The language support envisaged by the participants is in line with provisions in practical English programmes offered by higher education institutions in the United States (Martirosyan et al., 2019). This further reinforces the need for more situational forms of oral communication support.

The expectation for the school to enhance the promotion of existing academic support also reflects the confusion of some proactive students. Although eager to utilise the academic support provided by the school, they reported that “many things must be searched for by oneself, and it is hard to find the exact support” (N).

The needs expressed by these Chinese students are not only limited to this group but instead have a broader scope. When asked about the controversy over whether support should be provided solely for the Chinese student group, the mainstream view among the participants was that Chinese students were more hopeful for cultural inclusivity and an equal support framework.

B mentioned that some teachers paid more attention to students from the host country in class. This participant did not think Chinese international students needed special academic support because of language and cultural issues, but he emphasised equality.

After all, when you were at a foreign university, you needed to first meet the language requirements. . . You couldn’t receive special interventions just because you were Chinese and because the Chinese student group was large. . . But there should be equality for everyone. (B)

The expectations of the participants underpin Bartram’s (2009) findings that a positive organisational culture is both important and central to the provision of support that adequately considers the Chinese student population.

D suggested, “Since Chinese students were admitted, teaching staff should have had some knowledge about them. . . my expectations are cultural integration, cultural inclusivity.” And N believed that UAB lacked systematic academic writing courses, but the participant also thought that in a foreign environment, Chinese students should have taken the initiative to adapt, and too much intervention would have affected the development of personal abilities.

The expectations for internationalisation are reflected in “equal practice opportunities. . . and the provision of more international project (F; B)”, and “more international English lectures, I really want to attend but completely could not understand Catalan (H).”

The internationalisation policies of UAB (UAB, 2011), reflected in the nearly half international student ratio in master’s programmes and the increasing number of courses taught in English, demonstrate UAB’s cooperative teaching strategy, which refers to treating international students as partners contributing to transformation (Kelly & Moogan, 2012). Rather than treating students as “problems” (Kelly & Moogan, 2012), providing appropriate academic support can more effectively support the achievement of the shared goals of students and universities.

Based on the participants’ narratives, Chinese international students as a group acknowledged that the existing academic support, while not completely meeting their needs and expectations, was sufficient to complete their studies. With the development of generative AI, the academic support provided by schools offers more possibilities for personalised support for students (Labadze et al., 2023). Nevertheless, considering generative AI is adept at providing feedback on academic writing instead of systematic teaching (Escalante et al., 2023), structured support aimed at developing learning abilities, together with a

culturally inclusive and internationally oriented environment, remains essential and cannot be replaced.

4. Conclusions

This study examines the experiences of Chinese postgraduate international students in seeking academic help in Spain, a topic of growing practical relevance within the internationalisation of Spanish higher education. Within the decentralised and collaborative system of academic support (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016), delivered across 13 teaching centres and various university departments, the different experiences, personal expectations and personality traits of Chinese students who have grown up under the same education system and social norms in China shape their views on academic support. The obstacles they encountered during their university years, such as being questioned by the teaching staff, unfamiliarity with the academic support system and academic rules, and language barriers, have led to an explicit demand. This demand can be understood as the result of colliding expectations between the teachers' sociocultural framework and those related to students' prior sociocultural histories, as expressed by Heng (2016). Rather than debating the one-size-fits-all academic support format (Ballo et al., 2019), students are concerned that current academic support lacks resources for effective and systematic academic writing and speaking courses, which are traditional academic support types existing in English-speaking study abroad destinations like the United States of America. By contextualising these challenges at the university level, universities can move away from what Heng (2016) terms a "deficit perspective" and recognise that these difficulties are often temporary transitions rooted in differing societal and cultural parameters.

Overall, the literature indicates that international students benefit most when universities combine academic advising, tutoring, language assistance, and outreach that encourages students to use these services.

The findings of this study enrich the literature on the types, learning experiences and voices regarding academic support for international students in higher education, especially in the context of Spain. In addition to identifying limitations in the provision of academic support in Spain (Bakay, 2023; Torralba et al., 2012); negative effects and concerns about low student participation (Ajayi, 2022; Hoyne & McNaught, 2013); debate over meeting the needs of Chinese students (Moon et al., 2020; Wolf & Phung, 2019); controversy over the one-size-fits-all support approach (Ballo et al., 2019); the influence of culture, socio-economic status, previous help-seeking experiences and personality in the process of academic help-seeking (Bornschlegel et al., 2020); factors influencing the adaptation of Chinese students include self-efficacy (A. Li & Gasser, 2005), self-determined motivation (V. Chirkov et al., 2007; V. I. Chirkov et al., 2008), and social support (Jou & Fukada, 1995); language ability, teacher–student relationships, and the new education system as main challenges for Chinese students in Spain (Lin et al., 2016), this study highlights the self-adaptability and self-regulatory abilities of students, suggesting that they do not need to be treated as a disadvantaged group requiring special attention. Instead, they should be viewed as "active appropriators" who possess the agency to adapt their behaviour according to the current sociocultural structures, as expressed by Heng (2018b). The specific academic needs of Chinese students in Spain, driven by their desire for better academic performance and their expectations for a more equitable and international academic support system, align with scholars' calls for improvements in higher education (González-Gil et al., 2016; Jeffery & Johnson, 2019).

These insights are valuable for UAB and other Spanish and international universities seeking to enhance their support systems. Effective academic support tailored to the specific needs of Chinese students can improve their academic performance (Ajayi, 2022), reduce

feelings of isolation (Bakay, 2023; Torralba et al., 2012), and foster a more inclusive and empowering learning environment (González-Gil et al., 2016), highlighting the necessity for culturally sensitive support mechanisms that can be adapted to various institutional contexts, for example preparing teachers with culturally responsive pedagogies (Heng, 2016). Furthermore, the study inspires Spanish higher education institutions that are faced with an increasing number of students from different cultural backgrounds in their internationalisation journey, including training staff in social support, raising awareness of internationalisation, enhancing the promotion of existing academic support, and improving the academic support system to enhance learning skills.

Future studies could focus on a wider range of stakeholders, including faculty and domestic students, to gain a deeper understanding of their characteristics and needs and to better build academic support that can improve participation and effectiveness by making evidence-based decisions (Chen & Mak, 2008).

In terms of limitations, this study uses a cross-sectional design primarily focusing on students in the mid to later stages of their graduate studies. Unlike longitudinal designs, it does not capture changes over time in students' thinking at different times and the reasons for these changes. In addition, the findings of this study are limited to the context of a single higher education institution (UAB); for this reason, the results cannot be transferred directly to all Spanish higher education institutions. The study may also be limited by a greater presence of female than male participants in the final sample, as the perceptions expressed may be influenced by gender-based views rooted both in the students' culture of origin and in the host country. Moreover, the voluntary nature of participation may also constitute a limitation, since students who did not take part may either feel that everything is working properly or, on the contrary, be more disappointed with the system and therefore have chosen not to participate.

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Data Availability Statement: This study was conducted through 14 interviews. Due to the ease with which participants could be identified, and in line with ethical requirements to ensure anonymity and privacy, the raw data have not been published. Researchers wishing to obtain further information about the data may contact the authors through the above-mentioned correspondence e-mail.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

UAB Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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