

Exploring international student challenges and self-adjustment strategies in Thailand

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 25, 2026

Revised May 25, 2026

Accepted Jun 8, 2026

Keywords:

Challenges
International college
International students
Self-adjustment
Strategies
Thailand

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by international undergraduate students at international colleges in Thailand and to examine the self-adjustment strategies they employ. The study contributes to international student research by providing a context-specific understanding of adjustment processes within a non-Western Southeast Asian setting, highlighting culturally embedded factors and emerging coping mechanisms. A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with 29 students from 16 nationalities. Data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis to identify key patterns in student experiences. The findings revealed three core themes: academic and administrative challenges, cultural and social adaptation, and self-adjustment and coping strategies. Major challenges include visa delays, language barriers, unfamiliar teaching styles, and social isolation. At the same time, students demonstrated active resilience through peer networks, digital tools, and proactive engagement with the host culture. The study proposes a contextually grounded understanding of international student adjustment, emphasizing the interaction between institutional structures, cultural norms, and individual agency. The findings suggest that universities should enhance pre-arrival support, language programs, and culturally responsive services to improve student well-being and academic success, while future research should explore longitudinal adjustment across multiple institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education globalization has surged, with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimating over 6,000,000 international students worldwide in 2022 [1], [2]. Growth is increasingly concentrated in non-Western hubs like Thailand and Southeast Asia as students seek culturally diverse environments [1], [2]. Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) reports that international enrollment in Thailand grew from roughly 25,110 in 2019 to over 30,000 in 2022 [3], driven by strategic internationalization, competitive tuition, and cultural appeal. However, these students face psychological, cultural, and academic challenges. If unaddressed, these hurdles can undermine student well-being and the long-term sustainability of Thailand's internationalization efforts.

Psychological well-being and cultural adjustment are now central to global higher education research [4], [5]. International students face significant stressors, language barriers, unfamiliar academic systems, and social integration hurdles, that drive up rates of anxiety, depression, and acculturative [6], [7].

While these challenges are documented worldwide, the Thai context is shaped by unique cultural values like *kreng jai* (เกรงใจ). Rooted in Buddhist principles of harmony and face-saving, *kreng jai* emphasizes deference, conflict avoidance, and a reluctance to impose on others. This culturally specific dynamic is not adequately captured by Western-derived adjustment frameworks, yet plays a central role in shaping how international students navigate Thai academic and social environments. This can create an “invisible barrier” where students, fearing social disruption, avoid seeking help or voicing academic struggles [8]. With 63% of international students in Thailand reporting moderate to severe homesickness and 41% experiencing social isolation [8], there is an urgent need to examine these underlying mechanisms and develop targeted interventions.

The significance of this research extends far beyond the individual experiences of international students. At a societal level, the successful integration and well-being of international students are essential for Thailand’s national development goals and its reputation as a welcoming and supportive destination for global talent [9]. High rates of student attrition, estimated at nearly 18% within the first year of study, pose a direct threat to the sustainability of Thailand’s internationalization efforts [1]. Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) [9] has emphasized the importance of culturally responsive mental health frameworks in educational settings, particularly in regions where stigma and lack of awareness often prevent individuals from accessing support [10]–[12]. Addressing the psychological and cultural adjustment of international students is thus not only a matter of individual welfare but also a strategic imperative for Thai higher education and public health policy.

Despite the growing body of literature on international student adjustment, significant research gaps remain, especially in the context of Thailand and Southeast Asia more broadly. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on Western host countries, employing theoretical models such as Berry’s [13] acculturation framework and Ward’s [14] cultural learning theory to understand the adjustment process [4], [5]. While these models offer valuable insights, they often fail to capture the unique cultural, linguistic, and institutional dynamics present in non-Western contexts [15]–[17]. For example, the hierarchical structures of Thai universities, indirect communication styles, and the influence of Buddhist philosophies on coping and resilience create an environment that is markedly different from the more egalitarian and individualistic cultures typically studied in the literature [18], [19].

Recent empirical studies in Thailand have begun to illuminate some of these distinctive features. Schartner *et al.* [8] found that self-efficacy and social support are key moderators of psychological stress among international students in Thai universities, a finding echoed by Lashari *et al.* [20] in studies of Chinese students in Southeast Asia. However, these studies are often limited by their reliance on quantitative survey methods, which may not fully capture the depth and complexity of students’ lived experiences. Furthermore, there is a lack of theoretical integration between psychological constructs such as self-efficacy and sociocultural models of adjustment, resulting in fragmented understandings that are insufficient for informing effective interventions [15]. Additionally, few studies have examined how Thai cultural concepts influence the adjustment process and the effectiveness of support mechanisms [21], [22].

To address these gaps, this research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of international students in Thailand. By centering the voices and perspectives of international students, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how social support, self-efficacy, and acculturative stress interact to shape psychological and cultural adjustment in the Thai context. This research also examines how Thai cultural norms and institutional practices can either facilitate or hinder adjustment, with the goal of identifying context-specific factors that contribute to well-being or distress.

The rising enrollment of international undergraduates in Thailand underscores the country’s growing appeal as a global education hub. However, this growth highlights the diverse academic, social, and cultural challenges these students face during adaptation. Understanding these obstacles is essential for designing institutional support systems that foster well-being and success. Accordingly, this study investigates the challenges international undergraduates encounter at Thai international colleges and explores the self-adjustment strategies they employ to navigate academic demands and cultural transitions.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to address its objectives of investigating the challenges encountered by international undergraduate students at international colleges in Thailand and exploring their self-adjustment strategies. Qualitative inquiry facilitates a detailed exploration of participants’ lived experiences and captures the complexity and nuance of the participants’ perspectives [23].

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select 29 international undergraduates from various backgrounds and programs [23]. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as thematic saturation typically occurs within 20 to 30 participants in a shared context [23]–[25]. In this study, no new themes emerged after the 22nd interview, confirming data adequacy. Participants ranged from 19 to 41 years old; the inclusion of a 41-year-old American veteran provided a unique contrast to the typical student profile through his prior international experience. While age influenced individual adjustment, it was not a defining theme; instead, variations were more closely linked to nationality, program type, and prior travel. The cohort included 12 full-time and 17 exchange students, primarily from Business Administration with some from the Arts. As shown in Table 1, Bruneian students formed the largest nationality group.

2.3. Data collection and analysis method

Semi-structured interviews provided both consistency and flexibility to explore individual perspectives [23]. Following ethical guidelines, participants were briefed on the study's objectives and provided informed consent [24]. Interviews were recorded with permission, stored securely, and transcribed verbatim, with confidentiality maintained through participant-selected pseudonyms [26]. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis; the research team repeatedly reviewed transcripts to identify significant statements regarding challenges and coping strategies. To ensure trustworthiness, participants reviewed the interpretations for accuracy. The process concluded with collaborative researcher discussions to refine themes, ensuring both methodological rigor and authentic representation of participant voices.

To enhance analytical depth, a case-based narrative approach was used to complement thematic analysis. Three participants were selected through maximum variation sampling to represent diversity in nationality, student status, and academic experience: Lan (Vietnamese, full-time student), Peña (Mexican, exchange student), and Chay (Indonesian, exchange student), whose detailed demographic and academic profiles are summarized in Table 2. These cases were not treated as exceptional instances but as illustrative examples that reflect patterns observed across the broader dataset of twenty-nine participants. All participant names are pseudonyms assigned prior to analysis to protect confidentiality.

Table 1. Participants' nationalities

Nationalities	Number of participants
Vietnamese	1
Myanmar	2
Bruneian	6
Indonesian	2
Taiwanese	2
Chinese	4
Nepalese	1
Indian	1
Kenyan	1
Polish	1
Dutch	1
French	3
Spanish	1
Mexican	1
American	2

Table 2. Information of the participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Nationality	Type of student	Program of study
Lan	22	Vietnamese	Full-time student	Hotel management
Peña	20	Mexican	Exchange student	Hotel management
Chay	21	Indonesian	Exchange student	International business management

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the themes derived from the thematic analysis of interviews with all twenty-nine participants, focusing on the challenges faced by international undergraduate students at international colleges in Thailand and the self-adjustment strategies they employed. To provide depth and illustrative richness, the experiences of three participants are foregrounded as detailed case narratives: Lan (Vietnamese, full-time student), Peña (Mexican, exchange student), and Chay (Indonesian, exchange student). These three were selected through maximum variation sampling, representing diversity in nationality, student type (full-time and exchange), and academic program, while their narratives most fully

captured the range of themes that emerged across the broader dataset. Supportive evidence from additional participants is incorporated throughout the discussion to confirm the representativeness of these themes and to present converging perspectives. All names used are pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.

3.1. Theme 1: academic and administrative challenges

Lan (Vietnamese) faced significant administrative hurdles, particularly with delayed visa processing, which stressfully caused her to miss the first week of classes. Apart from this, the lecture-based teaching style, with limited student participation, was another adjustment from her more intensive home-country academic experience. She described the impact on group dynamics directly:

"Group work and collaboration might be more challenging when working with classmates who have different communication styles. I try to take initiative in group work and try to establish clear communication from the start." (Lan, Vietnamese)

Peña (Mexican) struggled with language barriers in English-medium study. She described classroom communication as particularly challenging:

"Sometimes I find it difficult to understand my teachers because I ask my classmates what the teacher meant and when my classmates and I don't understand each other we usually use a translator to find out what each other means." (Peña, Mexican)

Chay (Indonesian) experienced initial culture shock and language barriers. She recalled:

"Sometimes language was a barrier, but I asked questions and sought help from classmates. The teaching style was a bit more relaxed than in Indonesia." (Chay, Indonesian)

This perception contrasts with that of Fang (Chinese), who described the Thai classroom as stimulating rather than relaxed:

"The classroom atmosphere of Thai teachers is very good, and there is a lot of interaction between teachers and students—teachers are always asking questions to students and the students also joke with the teacher." (Fang, Chinese)

These divergent perceptions are not contradictory; rather, they reflect different prior educational socialisations. Students from competitive home systems experienced Thailand as engaging, while those from more structured systems perceived it as relaxed. This underscores the importance of treating educational background, not merely nationality, as a variable in adjustment research [27].

3.2. Theme 2: cultural and social adaptation

Lan (Vietnamese) found that language barriers slowed social integration despite cultural similarities with Thailand. She explained:

"It's quite take time for me since the language barrier and I mostly use English to communicate, but sometime the Thai students and locals might not be confident or comfortable to speak English so it makes me feel difficult to talk with them. But the Thai people are very friendly and they always try to communicate." (Lan, Vietnamese)

Peña (Mexican) encountered cultural differences in food and religion, describing the contrast between Mexican Catholicism and Thai Buddhism as "a complete change in beliefs and mindset." Despite this, she found Thai people consistently supportive:

"Thai people are very friendly and polite and they understand that if you don't speak the language they will speak the best way to communicate with you." (Peña, Mexican)

Her prior social media research helped temper expectations before arrival. Chay (Indonesian) prepared carefully yet still encountered unexpected cultural differences:

"There might be differences in social etiquette, such as how people greet each other, dress, or behave in public spaces. The international student office and other exchange students were very helpful." (Chay, Indonesian)

This underscores the limits of pre-departure preparation and the continuing value of on-arrival institutional support.

3.3. Theme 3: self-adjustment and coping strategies

Lan (Vietnamese) managed stress through family contact and campus social activities. Looking beyond her own experience, she advocated for institutional improvements:

“The university should provide dedicated advisors who are specifically trained to assist international students to help them navigate academic, cultural, and personal challenges that general student services may not fully address.” (Lan, Vietnamese)

Peña (Mexican) relied strongly on personal resilience and self-directed problem-solving, using digital tools including Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT. She described her approach:

“I usually try to keep a cool and calm mind to look at the different options I can think of to solve the problem and implement the best one I can find. To be honest, the school helped a lot, but I decided to do everything on my own.” (Peña, Mexican)

Chay (Indonesian) coped through social activities, exercise, and deliberate engagement with her host country. She offered the following advice to future students:

“I talk and hang out with my friends, exercise, and explore Thailand. Be open-minded, embrace the culture, and don’t be afraid to ask for help.” (Chay, Indonesian)

Resilience in this study is not treated as an abstract or inferred concept but is evidenced through observable behaviours and participant-reported actions. Indicators of resilience include continued enrolment despite initial challenges, proactive problem-solving, active engagement in academic and social settings, and the strategic use of peer networks and digital tools. Lan initiated communication in group work; Peña leveraged AI translation tools; Chay built social connections deliberately. A Nepalese participant reflected:

“It’ll work out in the end if you believe in yourself and keep going, although at first it could feel quite difficult to adjust to a new environment.” (Nepalese participant)

A Myanmar participant who had studied in Thailand for three years similarly noted that she had “quite settled down”, pointing to a longitudinal trajectory of successful adjustment. These findings suggest that resilience is enacted through adaptive practices rather than merely psychological endurance, reinforcing its role as a dynamic process within international student adjustment [28], [29]. Accessible institutional support systems, including international student offices, language resources, and structured social programming, serve as critical enablers of this active resilience.

The specific challenges and corresponding coping mechanisms identified among the primary case participants are summarized in Table 3. Despite these challenges, participants reported positive experiences that aided their adjustment and well-being. These insights highlight environmental factors that support integration, offering guidance for institutions in Thailand and other non-Western host countries. The following themes emerged from the accounts of Chay (Indonesian), June (French), Peña (Mexican), Fang (Chinese), Ada (Polish), Sunny (Bruneian), Lan (Vietnamese), and Ben (American).

Table 3. Challenges and self-adjustment strategies

Pseudonyms	Challenges	Self-adjustment strategies
Lan (Vietnamese)	Visa delays, language barriers, group work difficulties	Proactive group leadership, university support, family contact, suggested more advisors/language support
Peña (Mexican)	Accommodation issues, language barriers, communication with teachers/classmates	Translation tools, calm problem-solving, family support, social media research, self-reliance
Chay (Indonesian)	Culture shock, language barriers in class	Cultural research, peer support, international office, stress management through activities, open-mindedness

Many chose Thailand for cultural immersion in a distinct environment. For example, Chay (Indonesian) sought new academic and cultural experiences, while June (French) wanted a non-Western setting. This aligns with ‘push-pull’ research identifying cultural distinctiveness as a primary draw [4], [5].

Ultimately, this engagement yielded tangible growth: broader perspectives, global awareness, and cultural appreciation, competencies highly valued in the global labor market.

Thai warmth and approachability were consistently cited as key facilitators. June (French) highlighted their helpfulness, while Peña (Mexican) noted how peers adapted communication to bridge language gaps. Adjustment theory identifies host-national contact and social acceptance as top predictors of student well-being [4], [26]; in Thailand, this hospitality serves as a powerful informal support that offsets language and institutional barriers.

Participants often found the Thai classroom more conducive to learning than their home contexts, though perceptions varied by background. Fang (Chinese) noted more frequent teacher-student interaction and less hierarchy than in China, while Chay (Indonesian) described the style as relatively relaxed. This variation, analyzed in theme 1, highlights how prior educational socialization shapes the student experience. Institutions can support this by making classroom expectations and participation norms explicit during orientation, rather than assuming a universal baseline.

Formal and informal networks are critical to adjustment. Sunny (Bruneian) valued the international office and peer exchanges, while Ada (Polish) emphasized study buddies and faculty contact. This aligns with research identifying social support, both institutional and peer-based, as a top predictor of well-being and academic success [29], [30]. Participants viewed these as distinct but complementary, suggesting that formal programs and organic peer connections together form a necessary, integrated support ecosystem.

Participants viewed their time in Thailand as a catalyst for personal growth. Chay (Indonesian) advised incoming students to remain open-minded and proactive, while Lan (Vietnamese) stressed patience and cultural respect. These reflections align with transformative learning theory: initial stressors become growth experiences when students have adequate support and reflection opportunities [26], [31]. For institutions, this suggests that orientation and mentoring should frame early difficulties as navigable learning opportunities rather than problems to be eliminated.

Finally, the broader living environment in Thailand was identified as a meaningful contributor to student well-being. Ben (American) described daily life as affordable, peaceful, and rich in new experiences, while Chay (Indonesian) actively used exploration as a stress management strategy. This finding resonates with well-being research that emphasizes the importance of off-campus quality of life in shaping international students' overall experience and intention to remain enrolled [7], [11]. For institutions in non-Western host countries beyond Thailand, this suggests that showcasing the experiential dimensions of study abroad, not merely academic offerings, may be an effective element of both recruitment and retention strategies.

The findings of this study both extend and complicate existing literature on international student adjustment. The three themes identified, academic and administrative challenges, cultural and social adaptation, and self-adjustment and coping strategies, are consistent with adjustment frameworks proposed by Berry [13] and Ward [14], which predict that students will encounter difficulties across behavioral, psychological, and sociocultural domains. However, the present study adds texture to these frameworks by foregrounding the institutional and cultural specificities of a non-Western host context, where dynamics such as '*kreng jai*', hierarchical classroom structures, and administrative barriers interact in ways not adequately captured by models developed in Western settings [15]–[17]. This supports the growing scholarly call for culturally contextualized theories of adjustment [22], [24], [26].

With respect to academic and administrative challenges, the experiences reported here, visa delays, language barriers, unfamiliar teaching styles, and accommodation difficulties, are broadly consistent with findings from comparable studies in other Southeast Asian and non-Western contexts [5], [27]. However, a distinctive feature of the Thai case is the compounding effect of institutional opacity: students arriving without adequate pre-arrival information encountered not only logistical problems but also a sense of abandonment that amplified their acculturative stress during a particularly vulnerable period. This aligns with research on the critical role of pre-arrival support in shaping initial adjustment trajectories [10], [24] and points to a structural gap that Thai international colleges are well-positioned to address through targeted orientation reform.

On the question of cultural adaptation, this study highlights a nuanced finding with implications beyond Thailand: students' perceptions of the host academic environment were systematically shaped by their prior educational socialization. Participants from highly competitive or lecture-intensive home systems (China, Myanmar) experienced Thai classrooms as interactively stimulating, while those from more structured neighboring systems (Indonesia) perceived the same environment as comparatively relaxed. This 'comparison effect' has been noted in intercultural adjustment literature [15], [26] but is rarely foregrounded in empirical studies. It suggests that adjustment researchers and practitioners should treat educational background, not merely nationality, as a key variable when designing support interventions and interpreting adjustment data.

The coping and self-adjustment strategies identified in this study resonate with broader literature on resilience and agency in international student populations [29], [30], [32]. Participants did not wait passively for institutional support but actively sought social connections, leveraged digital tools, and engaged proactively with their environment. Notably, the use of AI-powered translation tools (including ChatGPT) for

daily academic communication represents an emergent coping strategy not widely documented in the literature to date, with implications for how institutions conceptualize language support in an era of rapidly advancing language technologies [28], [33]. At the same time, the study confirms that institutional support and peer networks remain indispensable: students who accessed formal support (international student offices, orientation programs) and informal networks (study buddies, peer exchange students) reported more positive adjustment outcomes, consistent with findings from the wider adjustment literature [27]–[29], [33].

Taken together, these findings have relevance beyond Thailand. As non-Western host countries across Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Global South increasingly compete for international students, understanding adjustment in culturally specific terms becomes a strategic as well as a scholarly priority. The present study demonstrates that qualitative, student-centered research methods, grounded in participants' own voices and conducted within specific cultural and institutional contexts, can yield actionable insights that aggregate, survey-based studies are unlikely to capture. Institutions in comparable non-Western contexts may find the themes and enabling conditions identified here directly transferable, even where the specific cultural norms differ.

3.4. A conceptual framework of international student adjustment in the Thai context

Building on the findings of this study, a conceptual framework of international student adjustment in the Thai context is proposed as in Figure 1. The framework highlights the dynamic interaction between three key dimensions: i) academic and administrative challenges; ii) cultural and social adaptation; and iii) self-adjustment strategies. These dimensions are mediated by culturally specific factors, particularly Thai sociocultural norms such as *kreng jai*, hierarchical academic relationships, and indirect communication styles, which together constitute the host cultural context within which adjustment processes unfold.

The framework further emphasizes that adjustment is not a linear process but a dynamic and iterative one, in which students continuously respond to challenges through the development of coping strategies. These strategies can be categorized into four types: cognitive strategies (e.g., problem-solving and mindset adjustment), behavioural strategies (e.g., active participation and help-seeking), social strategies (e.g., peer networking and family support), and emerging technology-assisted strategies such as the use of AI-based translation tools. All three dimensions interact bidirectionally and feed into adjustment outcomes: academic success, psychological well-being, and sustained enrolment. This interaction is mediated by institutional support structures, including pre-arrival information, dedicated international student advisors, language programs, and culturally responsive counselling services.

This model extends existing adjustment theories by Berry [13] and Ward [14] by incorporating context-specific cultural variables unique to the Thai higher education setting and by foregrounding the role of digital tools in contemporary student adaptation, an element not captured in earlier frameworks developed in Western contexts. It provides a practical framework for institutions in non-Western host countries to design targeted interventions that address both structural barriers and individual coping processes.

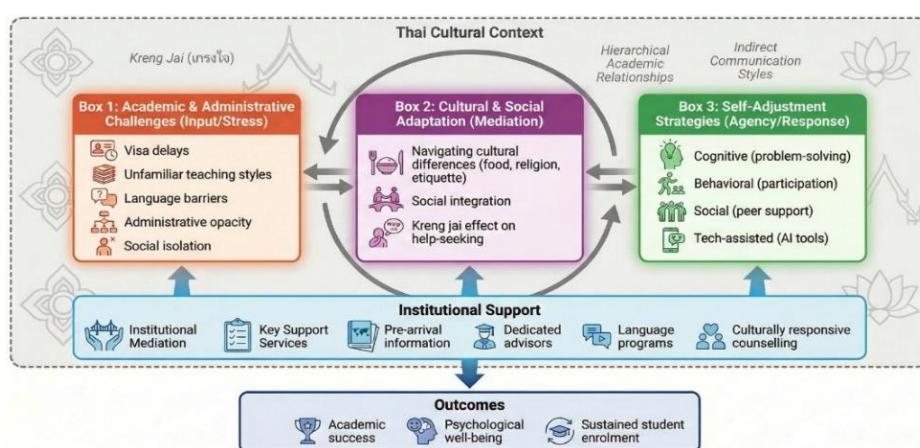


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of international student adjustment in the Thai context [13], [14]

4. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature by providing a contextually grounded understanding of international student adjustment in a non-Western setting. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with

twenty-nine students from sixteen nationalities, thematic analysis identified three core themes: academic and administrative challenges, cultural and social adaptation, and self-adjustment and coping strategies. It extends existing theoretical frameworks by incorporating culturally specific factors unique to the Thai context—including *kreng jai*, hierarchical academic structures, and institutional opacity—and by identifying emerging technology-assisted coping strategies not previously documented in the adjustment literature. A conceptual framework is proposed that maps the dynamic, iterative interaction between challenges, adaptation processes, and student-led strategies within a culturally embedded host environment.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrated institutional support systems that address both structural challenges and individual adaptation processes. Universities are encouraged to provide clear pre-arrival information, culturally responsive counselling, dedicated international student advisors, and structured social programming. By aligning institutional practices with students' lived experiences, universities can enhance both academic success and overall well-being among international students. This study is not without limitations: the sample was drawn from a single institutional context, and the qualitative design limits generalizability. Future research should extend this work through longitudinal designs, comparative studies across multiple Thai institutions and other non-Western host countries, and mixed-methods approaches that link qualitative themes to quantifiable adjustment outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank all student participants for generously sharing their experiences and perspectives. Their contributions were essential to this study. This research received no research grant or contract from any public, commercial, or non-profit funding agency.

FUNDING INFORMATION

While recognizing the important role that funding can play in supporting research, this study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors, nor did it obtain any external financial support.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research reported in the paper entitled “Exploring International Student Challenges and Self-Adjustment Strategies in Thailand.” The authors report no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and scope prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained after providing a verbal and written explanation of participants' rights, including voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality. Only those who provided signed consent were included in the study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Burapha University (Ethics Code: HU015/2568(E2)). All data obtained from respondents were used solely for research purposes, with strict adherence to privacy and confidentiality protocols. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all respondents were informed of the research ethics guidelines before providing their consent.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All data supporting the results of this study are included within the article, and no supplementary source data are necessary.

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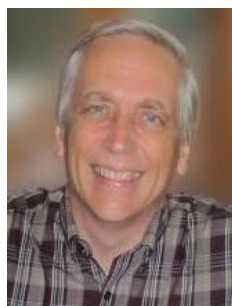
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