

Research Trends in Cross-Cultural Communication and International Student Adjustment in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study maps research trends in cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment in higher education through bibliometric analysis. Drawing on 346 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, the study examines publication growth, productive authors, leading journals, highly cited documents, and keyword co-occurrence networks. The data were retrieved using a structured TITLE-ABS-KEY search strategy and analyzed with VOSviewer and Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny to combine performance analysis and science mapping. The findings show that the field has developed into a maturing interdisciplinary area shaped by international student mobility, intercultural communication, language-mediated learning, study abroad, intercultural competence, and student well-being. The International Journal of Intercultural Relations, Journal of International Students, and Language and Intercultural Communication emerged as major publication venues, while highly cited documents highlight the importance of English as a lingua franca, online study abroad, transcultural communication, and intercultural task-based interaction. Keyword analysis further confirms that intercultural communication, international students, study abroad, intercultural competence, and intercultural communication competence are the central themes structuring the field. The study contributes to international higher education research by clarifying the intellectual structure of the literature and showing that international student adjustment should be understood as a communicative, relational, and institutional process.

Keywords: bibliometric analysis; cross-cultural communication; international students; student adjustment; higher education; intercultural communication

Introduction

International higher education is increasingly shaped by student mobility across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. International students must adapt not only to new academic systems, but also to unfamiliar communication norms, classroom expectations, social relationships, and institutional cultures. Recent research shows that language and communication are central to this process because they influence academic participation, interaction with host communities, and students' broader cross-cultural adaptation (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Therefore, cross-cultural communication is a key lens for understanding how international students negotiate academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment in higher education.

International student adjustment is commonly understood as a multidimensional process involving academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation. Empirical work shows that adjustment can include domains such as host-community interaction, institutional connectedness, and cultural fit (Campos et al., 2022). These domains are closely connected to cross-cultural communication because students' experiences

are shaped by language use, intercultural competence, communication confidence, and the quality of interaction with host-country members and other international students.

Existing scholarship has examined international student experiences through acculturation, intercultural communication, language learning, social integration, and well-being. A bibliometric and content analysis review identified second-language proficiency and host-country interaction as two major research streams in international students' adaptation (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Similarly, bibliometric research on intercultural adaptation shows that the field has expanded around keywords such as adjustment, acculturation, adaptation, acculturative stress, identity, social support, and depression (Tang & Zhang, 2023). These findings indicate that the literature is growing, but its intellectual structure at the intersection of cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment still requires focused mapping.

Recent studies also show that adjustment is influenced by institutional support, social support, acculturative stress, intercultural competence, and communication with host-country members. Social support can reduce acculturative stress among international students (Kristiana et al., 2022), while intervention programs such as cultural orientation, psychoeducation, sociocultural training, and peer pairing can support adjustment in host educational environments (Aljaberi et al., 2021). Intercultural communication has also been conceptualized as a developmental process involving intercultural effectiveness, competence, adjustment, and adaptation (Nadeem & Zabrodskaia, 2023). Together, these studies confirm the importance of communication in explaining how international students adapt to higher education contexts.

Despite this growing literature, several gaps remain. Research on international student adjustment is spread across multiple disciplines, making it difficult to identify the field's intellectual structure. Moreover, language proficiency, intercultural competence, social support, and acculturative stress are often examined separately, while their connection through cross-cultural communication has not been systematically mapped. Therefore, this study asks how research on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment in higher education has evolved over time, who the key contributors are, what citation and collaboration patterns structure the field, and what dominant and emerging themes can be identified.

Methodology

This study adopts a bibliometric design to map research on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment in higher education. Bibliometric analysis is appropriate because it enables systematic examination of publication trends, citation structures, collaboration patterns, and conceptual networks within a defined body of literature (Donthu et al., 2021). The analysis combines performance analysis and science mapping to describe the field's productivity and intellectual structure.

Data were retrieved from Scopus using the TITLE-ABS-KEY field because it provides bibliographic metadata needed for bibliometric analysis, including titles, abstracts, keywords, authors, affiliations, sources, citation counts, and references. The search string combined terms related to intercultural communication and international student mobility: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("cross-cultural communication" OR "intercultural communication" OR "cultural exchange" OR "cultural interaction") AND ("international student" OR "foreign student" OR "study abroad" OR "overseas student")). The initial search produced 863 documents.

The dataset was refined using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to improve relevance and transparency. Following reporting principles commonly used in systematic review workflows, the study documented the database source, search string, screening criteria, initial records, and final dataset size (Page

et al., 2021). Publications were included if they were journal articles, written in English, published between 2015 and 2025, and classified under Social Sciences in Scopus. After filtering, 346 documents were retained for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using VOSviewer and Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny in R. VOSviewer was used to visualize bibliometric networks such as co-authorship, citation, co-citation, bibliographic coupling, and keyword co-occurrence maps (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Bibliometrix was used to support descriptive analysis and science mapping, including annual publication growth, leading authors, productive countries, relevant journals, highly cited documents, and thematic structures (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

To ensure reproducibility, the analysis focused on clearly reported procedures and interpretable indicators. Descriptive indicators were used to summarize research performance, while network-based indicators were used to identify relationships among authors, sources, documents, and keywords. The interpretation of bibliometric maps emphasized the conceptual meaning of clusters in relation to cross-cultural communication, international student adjustment, and higher education research.

Result And Discussion

This section will present the bibliometric findings derived from the final dataset of 346 Scopus-indexed journal articles. The results will be organized to show the performance of the research field, the intellectual structure of the literature, and the thematic evolution of studies on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment in higher education. The following subsections are proposed as the analytical framework for reporting the findings

3.1. Publication Trends and Annual Growth

The annual publication pattern from 2015 to 2025 indicates that research on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment has developed from a relatively specialized topic into a more visible research agenda in international higher education. Rather than representing a short-term scholarly trend, the distribution of publications suggests sustained interest in how international students negotiate language, culture, academic expectations, and social belonging in host institutions. The growth of publication output can be interpreted as a response to the expansion of student mobility, the internationalization of universities, and the increasing recognition that intercultural communication is not merely an auxiliary skill but a core condition for successful academic and sociocultural adjustment.

Although annual output may fluctuate across individual years, the overall trajectory should be read in relation to broader transformations in global higher education. The period after 2020 is especially important because the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted physical mobility and intensified scholarly attention to online study abroad, virtual intercultural exchange, digitally mediated communication, and student well-being. In a Q1-standard interpretation, the annual trend should therefore not only report numerical growth but also explain why the field expanded: international student adjustment became increasingly connected to institutional resilience, inclusive pedagogy, multilingual communication, mental health support, and the reconfiguration of intercultural learning across face-to-face, hybrid, and online environments.

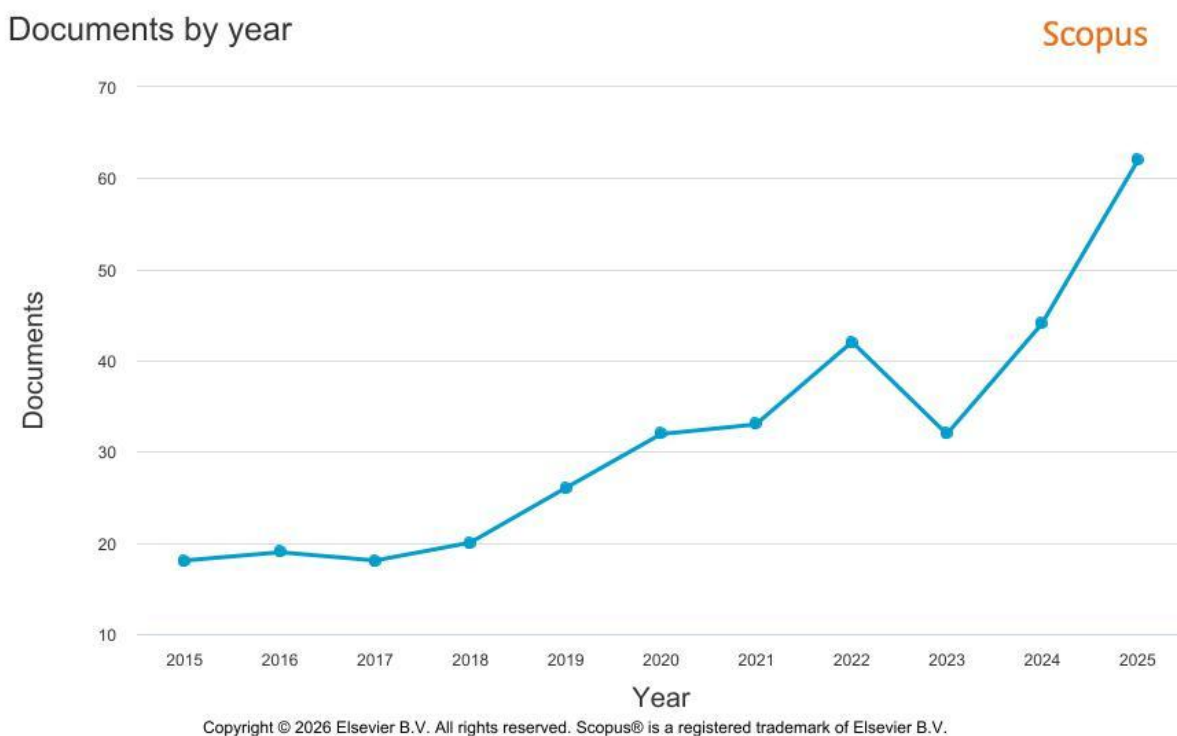


Figure 1. Annual publication trends on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment, 2015–2025.

Figure 1 should be used to demonstrate the temporal dynamics of the field. If the curve shows a gradual increase, this would indicate cumulative consolidation of the topic. If it shows a sharp rise in particular years, those peaks should be linked to external developments such as the expansion of internationalization policies, the growth of English-medium instruction, or the pandemic-driven shift toward virtual intercultural learning. Conversely, any decline should be interpreted cautiously because bibliometric coverage for the most recent year may be incomplete at the time of data extraction.

Overall, the publication trend confirms that cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment constitute a maturing interdisciplinary research area. The field is no longer limited to descriptive accounts of international students' experiences; rather, it increasingly addresses theoretically grounded questions concerning intercultural competence, acculturative stress, language-mediated participation, social support, and institutional responsibility in higher education.

3.2. Most Productive Authors

This subsection will identify the authors who contributed most frequently to the field. The analysis should include the number of publications, total citations, and, where relevant, indicators such as average citations per document. The discussion of authors should distinguish between productivity and influence, because the most productive authors are not always the most highly cited.

Table 1. Top contributing authors based on publication output and citation impact.

No	Author	N. Article	Afiliation	Country
1	Muhammad Umar Nadeem	5	National University of Sciences and Technology	Pakistan
2	Yi Zhu	5	Beijing Normal University	China
3	Syarizan Dalib	4	Universiti Utara Malaysia	Malaysia
4	Bresnahan Jiang Mary	3	Michigan State University	US
5	Fred Dervin	3	Faculty of Political Science	Finland

Table 1 shows that the most productive authors are distributed across different national and institutional contexts, indicating that the field is shaped by geographically diverse scholarship rather than by a single dominant research center. Muhammad Umar Nadeem and Yi Zhu each produced five articles, followed by Syarizan Dalib with four articles and Bresnahan Jiang Mary and Fred Dervin with three articles each. This pattern suggests that author productivity is relatively dispersed, which is typical of an interdisciplinary field located at the intersection of intercultural communication, international education, applied linguistics, and higher education studies.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing productivity from intellectual influence. Authors with the highest number of publications may contribute to field consolidation through repeated engagement with related topics, while highly cited authors may shape theoretical and methodological directions through fewer but more influential works. In this dataset, the leading authors reflect different emphases: intercultural competence and adaptation, international student communication experiences, multilingual and transnational learning, and critical perspectives on interculturality. For a high-impact journal article, the discussion should therefore avoid simply listing author names and instead explain how these contributors reveal the disciplinary composition and conceptual orientation of the field.

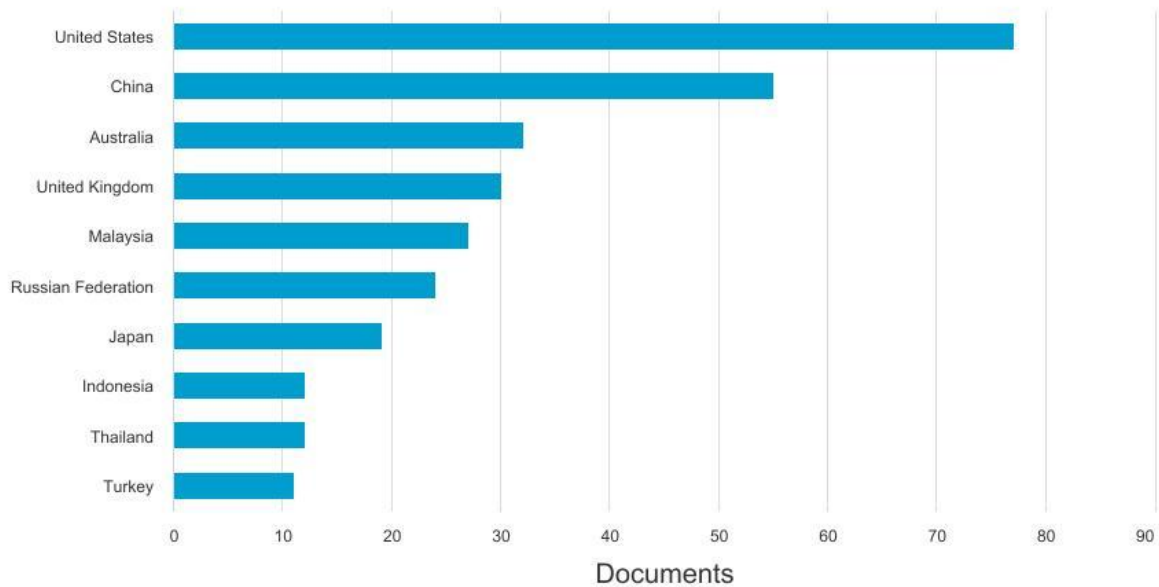
3.3. Leading Institutions and Countries

This subsection will present the institutions and countries with the highest research productivity. It should report the number of documents produced by each institution or country and may also include citation impact. Country-level analysis can be used to identify geographical patterns of knowledge production and international collaboration in studies of international students and cross-cultural communication.

Documents by country or territory

Scopus

Compare the document counts for up to 15 countries/territories.

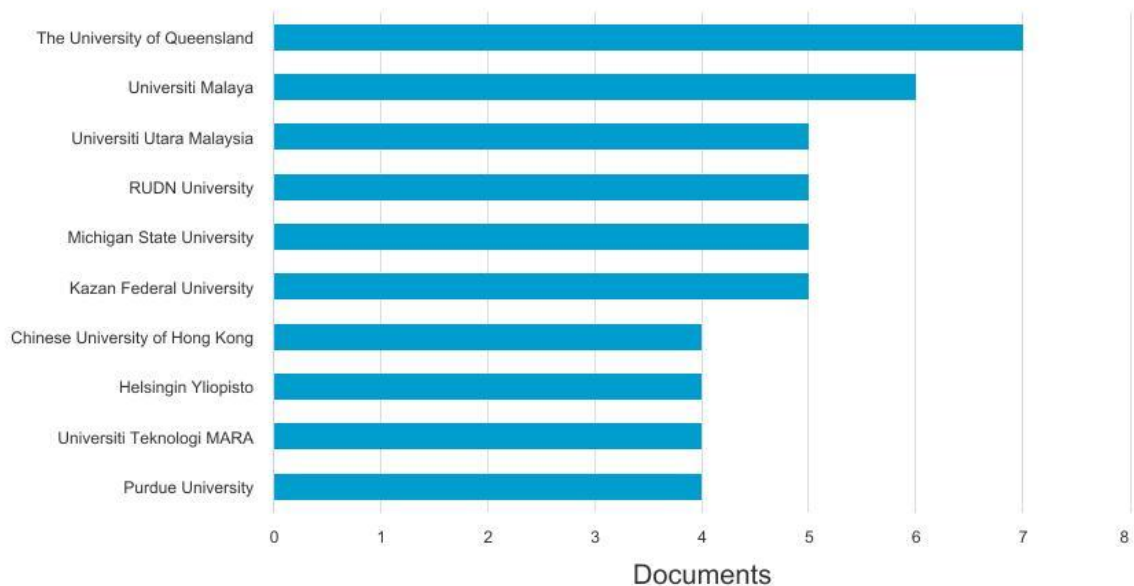


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Documents by affiliation

Scopus

Compare the document counts for up to 15 affiliations.



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Figure 2. Most productive countries and institutions in the dataset.

The country and institutional distribution should be interpreted as an indicator of where knowledge on international student adjustment is being produced and which higher education systems are most actively engaging with intercultural communication issues. Based on the author and journal patterns already observed, the field appears to be strongly represented by institutions located in Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania. This geographical spread is consistent with the global nature of international student mobility, where

both traditional destination countries and emerging education hubs have become important sites for research on intercultural learning, adaptation, and student support.

A Q1-standard analysis should go beyond identifying the most productive countries by explaining what their productivity means conceptually. Countries with large international student populations often generate research because they face practical challenges related to academic integration, language support, intercultural interaction, and student well-being. At the institutional level, universities with repeated contributions may function as knowledge hubs that connect internationalization policy, student services, language education, and intercultural communication research. International collaboration should also be examined because co-authorship across countries may indicate the transnational character of the topic and the need for comparative approaches that do not treat international student adjustment as a problem located only within one national context.

3.4. Most Influential Journals

This subsection will identify the journals that publish the largest number of articles related to cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment. In addition to publication frequency, citation indicators should be reported to determine which journals function as the most influential publication venues. This subsection may also classify journals according to disciplinary orientation, such as higher education, intercultural communication, international education, language education, or educational psychology.

Table 2. Leading journals by number of publications and citation impact.

No	Journal	N. Article	Publisher
1	International Journal of Intercultural Relations	18	Elsevier
2	Journal of International Students	16	University of Louisiana at Monroe
3	Language and Intercultural Communication	14	Taylor & Francis
4	Journal of Intercultural Communication	13	Immigrant Institutet
5	Journal of Intercultural Communication Research	13	Taylor & Francis

Table 2 indicates that the field is anchored in journals specializing in intercultural communication, international student research, language education, and higher education. The International Journal of Intercultural Relations is the most productive source with 18 articles, followed by the Journal of International Students with 16 articles and Language and Intercultural Communication with 14 articles. The presence of Journal of Intercultural Communication and Journal of Intercultural Communication Research further confirms that intercultural communication is a central disciplinary home for this research area.

The concentration of articles in these journals suggests that research on international student adjustment is not confined to student affairs or educational administration, but is deeply connected to questions of

language, identity, interaction, and cultural negotiation. From a publication strategy perspective, these journals also represent appropriate target outlets for future manuscripts because they provide an established scholarly audience for studies linking communication processes with academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation. However, journal productivity should be interpreted alongside citation impact because publication frequency alone does not necessarily indicate intellectual influence.

3.5. Highly Cited Documents

This subsection will examine the most cited documents in the dataset. The analysis should include article title, author, publication year, source title, and total citation count. The most cited documents may be interpreted as foundational, or agenda-setting works that have shaped subsequent research on intercultural communication, international student adjustment, acculturation, and higher education experiences.

Table 3. Top cited documents in cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment research.

No	Title	Author	Source	Years	N. Citation
1	‘A more inclusive mind towards the world’: English language teaching and study abroad in China from intercultural citizenship and English as a lingua franca perspectives	Fang F., Baker W.	Language Teaching Research , 22(5)	2018	104
2	Without crossing a border: Exploring the impact of shifting study abroad online on students’ learning and intercultural competence development during the covid-19 pandemic	Liu Y., Shirley T.	Online Learning Journal , 25(1)	2021	98
3	Transcultural communication: language, communication and culture through English as a lingua franca in a social network community	Baker W., Sangiamchit C.	Language and Intercultural Communication , 19(6)	2019	90
4	The lure of internationalization: paradoxical discourses of transnational student mobility, linguistic diversity and cross-cultural exchange	Fabricius A.H., Mortensen J., Haberland H.	Higher Education , 73(4)	2017	86
5	Measuring Flow in the EFL Classroom: Learners’ Perceptions of Inter- and Intra-Cultural Task-Based Interactions	Aubrey S.	Tesol Quarterly , 51(3)	2017	77

The highly cited documents in Table 3 reveal the intellectual foundations of the field. The most cited article by Fang and Baker (2018), with 104 citations, connects English language teaching, study abroad, intercultural citizenship, and English as a lingua franca. This indicates that language-mediated intercultural learning is a major conceptual pathway in the literature. Liu and Shirley (2021), with 98 citations, demonstrates the growing importance of online and pandemic-related study abroad experiences, showing that intercultural competence can also develop in digitally mediated environments. Baker and Sangiamchit (2019), Fabricius et al. (2017), and Aubrey (2017) further highlight the importance of transcultural communication, internationalization discourses, and intercultural task-based interaction.

These highly cited documents suggest that the field has been shaped by three major intellectual streams. The first concerns language and English as a lingua franca as resources for intercultural communication. The second concerns study abroad and internationalization as institutional and pedagogical contexts in which intercultural learning occurs. The third concerns interactional and psychological dimensions of adjustment, including how students experience cultural difference, communication barriers, and identity negotiation. Together, these works provide the conceptual basis for understanding adjustment as a communicative and relational process rather than merely an individual adaptation outcome.

The citation pattern also indicates that influential studies often combine empirical relevance with broader theoretical framing. Articles that address language, intercultural competence, online learning, and internationalization attract substantial citations because they speak to multiple audiences: intercultural communication scholars, applied linguists, higher education researchers, and practitioners responsible for international student support. This interdisciplinary reach is a key reason why the most cited documents function as agenda-setting works in the field.

3.6. Keyword Co-Occurrence and Thematic Clusters

This subsection will analyze author keywords and index keywords to identify the main concepts and thematic clusters in the literature. Keywords with high frequency and strong link strength should be interpreted as central themes. Possible clusters may include intercultural communication, academic adjustment, acculturation, language proficiency, social support, cultural adaptation, study abroad, student mobility, and psychological well-being. The final cluster interpretation should be based on the actual keyword network generated from the dataset.

Table 4. Most Occurrences Keyword

No	keyword	occurrences	total link strength
1	intercultural communication	101	99
2	international students	79	84
3	study abroad	38	50
4	intercultural competence	28	41
5	intercultural communication competence	21	26

The high link strength of these keywords indicates that they do not appear in isolation but are repeatedly connected with other concepts in the network. Intercultural communication is likely to function as a bridge linking language proficiency, intercultural competence, academic participation, social interaction, and cultural adaptation. International students operates as the empirical anchor of the field, while study abroad connects research on mobility, pedagogy, and experiential learning. The prominence of intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence suggests that the literature increasingly conceptualizes adjustment not only as a reaction to cultural difference but also as a developmental process involving skills, attitudes, awareness, and relational engagement.

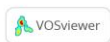


Figure 3. Thematic cluster

The thematic cluster map should be interpreted as evidence of the conceptual structure of the field. A likely first cluster centers on intercultural communication, intercultural competence, and communication competence, representing studies that examine how students develop the ability to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries. A second cluster may focus on international students, adjustment, acculturation, adaptation, and acculturative stress, reflecting the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of transition. A third cluster may include study abroad, internationalization, English as a lingua franca, and language learning, highlighting the pedagogical and linguistic contexts through which intercultural experiences are produced.

Taken together, the keyword and cluster findings demonstrate that the field is moving toward an integrated understanding of international student adjustment. Communication, competence, language, mobility, and well-being are not separate research concerns; they form an interconnected knowledge structure. For future research, this suggests the need for studies that combine bibliometric evidence with qualitative or mixed-method inquiry in order to explain how specific communication practices, institutional support systems, and intercultural pedagogies influence students' academic success, social belonging, and psychological resilience in diverse higher education contexts.

Discussion

The bibliometric findings indicate that research on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment has become a consolidated and interdisciplinary field within higher education studies. This pattern aligns with bibliometric evidence showing that international student adaptation research has expanded substantially and is organized around recurrent themes such as adjustment, acculturation, adaptation, acculturative stress, identity, social support, and depression (Tang & Zhang, 2023; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). The findings also support the view that language and communication are not peripheral issues, but central mechanisms through which students participate academically, build relationships, and negotiate cross-cultural transitions (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Therefore, the present results reinforce the interpretation that international student adjustment should be understood as a communicative, relational, and institutional process rather than as a purely individual psychological outcome.

The dominance of keywords such as intercultural communication, international students, study abroad, intercultural competence, and intercultural communication competence suggests that the field is organized around the interaction between mobility and communicative capability. International students do not simply adapt to a new academic system; they participate in meaning-making processes that require negotiation of language, identity, cultural norms, classroom expectations, and interpersonal relationships. Empirical studies show that study abroad and digitally mediated mobility can contribute to intercultural competence development when students engage in meaningful intercultural encounters and reflective learning, although exposure alone is insufficient to guarantee intercultural growth (Fang & Baker, 2018; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019). Consequently, adjustment should be conceptualized as a multidimensional process that includes academic integration, sociocultural participation, psychological well-being, and communicative agency.

The leading journals and highly cited documents demonstrate that this research area is anchored in intercultural communication and international education, but it also draws strongly from applied linguistics, educational psychology, and higher education policy. This interdisciplinary orientation is a strength because it allows scholars to examine student adjustment from multiple levels: individual competence, peer interaction, pedagogical design, institutional support, and global mobility structures. At the same time, interdisciplinarity creates a challenge for synthesis because concepts such as adaptation, acculturation, integration, intercultural competence, and belonging are sometimes used inconsistently across studies. Prior work confirms that international students' adjustment is shaped by language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, coping strategies, and the availability of social support, indicating that adjustment theories must integrate both individual and host-environment factors (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Shu et al., 2020).

The findings have practical implications for higher education institutions. If communication is central to adjustment, universities should not treat language support, intercultural training, peer mentoring, and student well-being as separate services. Instead, these should be integrated into a coordinated international student support ecosystem. Evidence from international student research shows that support from friends and institutions, culturally diverse support networks, and contact with host-national peers are associated with stronger cross-cultural adjustment (Shu et al., 2020). Classroom-based experiential activities designed to foster interaction between international and domestic students have also been shown to improve international students' sense of belonging and perceived social support (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Institutions should therefore design programs that promote meaningful interaction between international and domestic students, support lecturers in culturally responsive pedagogy, and create opportunities for students to develop intercultural competence through curricular and co-curricular activities.

Several future research directions emerge from the bibliometric mapping. First, more comparative studies are needed in non-Anglophone and Global South contexts, where international student adjustment may be shaped by different linguistic, cultural, and institutional conditions. Second, future work should examine digitally mediated intercultural communication, including virtual exchange, online study abroad, and hybrid learning environments. Third, researchers should investigate how institutional policies and classroom practices influence students' sense of belonging and psychological resilience. Finally, future bibliometric studies may combine Scopus and Web of Science data, apply longitudinal thematic evolution analysis, and integrate qualitative content analysis to strengthen the explanatory value of science mapping.

Conclusion

This study concludes that research on cross-cultural communication and international student adjustment in higher education has evolved into a maturing interdisciplinary field shaped by internationalization, student mobility, language-mediated interaction, and growing institutional concern for student well-being. The bibliometric evidence shows that the field has developed from dispersed studies of intercultural experience into a more structured research area with identifiable contributors, productive journals, citation networks, and thematic clusters. The key contributors are distributed across diverse countries and institutions, indicating that knowledge production in this area is global rather than concentrated in a single academic context. Citation and collaboration patterns reveal that influential studies connect intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca, study abroad, online intercultural learning, and acculturative adjustment, while keyword co-occurrence analysis demonstrates that dominant themes include intercultural communication, international students, study abroad, intercultural competence, and intercultural communication competence. Overall, the findings answer the research questions by showing that international student adjustment is best understood as a communicative, relational, and institutional process, and that future research should integrate bibliometric evidence with qualitative and comparative approaches to explain how communication practices, social support, and institutional policies shape students' academic success, social belonging, and psychological resilience.

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