

## Article

# Investigating International Students' Cultivation System for Higher Education Sustainability in China: Stakeholders' Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The quality of the international students' cultivation system is pivotal to the high-quality promotion for higher education sustainability in China. This study aims to explore 23 international students' opinions on their cultivation system at 6 higher education institutions in China by the qualitative approach of Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI). We found that the cultivation quality of international students needs to be promoted and the cultivation funding support of international student needs to be diversified. It is suggested that the government should improve the enrollment mechanism and the diversified cultivation system; optimize the cultivation concept of overseas students in China; establish the administrative management, supervision, and review system; build the dynamic monitoring of the scholarship system; and optimize the use of funds and establish a multi-channel funding system.

**Keywords:** international student; higher education sustainability; cultivation system; higher education system



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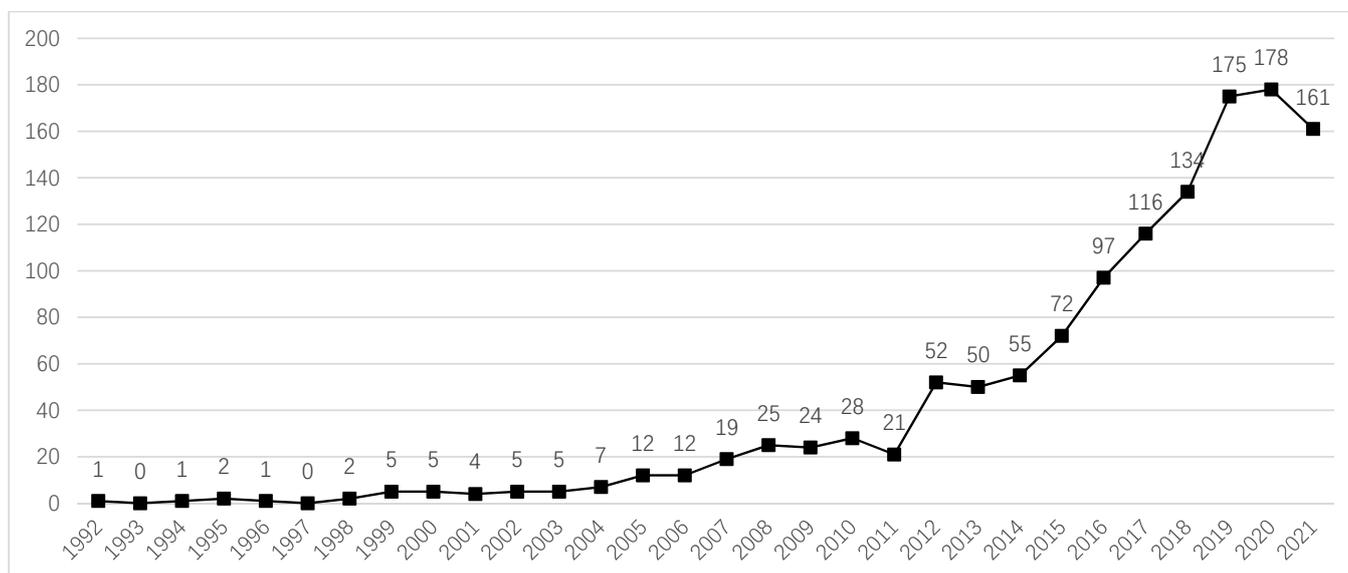
## 1. Introduction

The international students' cultivation system is pivotal to higher education sustainability in China. The idea of sustainability in the Chinese higher education context is to adhere to the sustainable development as the guide, with the long-term goal of building a learning society featuring lifelong learning for all, to promote the fair and coordinated development of education as the starting point, and to improve the ability of education to promote sustainable development [1]. In recent years, China has become the largest study abroad country in Asia [1]. The student cultivation system refers to the system that includes the goal, content, method, and way of student cultivation process [2]. The cultivation quality concentrates on the effect of student training, mainly including the learning effect of students' cognition, emotion, values, and other aspects.

According to the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, a total of 1292 research papers on Chinese students studying in China were first published in 1992, which began to rise steadily during the 21st century, and the average annual number of publications peaked at 178 in 2020 (See Figure 1).

Most previous studies focus on the educational policy and administrative perspectives on how to promote the cultivation system of international students [3–5]. However, from an individual perspective, there are limited studies on exploring international students' opinions on their cultivation system for higher education sustainability in China by the qualitative approach of Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI). This study aims to examine insider's perspectives on the cultivation system of international students. It is divided into several parts: the first two parts concentrate on examining international students in China's higher education institutions and the cultivation models of international students in China's higher education. The third part provides Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI) to analyze selected international students' ideas on their cultivation

system for higher education sustainability in China. The results and discussion have been provided in the last two parts.



**Figure 1.** The number of studies on international students in China.

## 2. International Students in China's Higher Education Institutions

Based on the existing literature review, the main research topics regarding to international student in China's higher education institutions can be divided into three aspects according to the process logic of studying in China: the analysis of the macro background and current situation of studying in China, the practical research, and the significance and function of studying in China [6]. From a macro perspective, some scholars divided the policy development of international students into three stages: the exploration stage at the beginning of China (1979–1978); the reform and opening development stage (1979–2013), and the comprehensive promotion stage (2013–present). In the micro dimension, there are some problems of international student development, such as the convergence of management mode and the weak competitiveness of the teaching and service level [7]. Additionally, there are also psychological problems of international students in daily management. In terms of countermeasures for promoting the quality of international student education, many scholars suggested that the government needs to improve the top-level design at the macro level, strengthen the concept, cognition, and common vision of studying in China [6–8]. In the meso-level, the government should provide full consideration to the characteristics of colleges and universities and realize self-evaluation, self-optimization, and self-supervision based on the characteristics of Chinese culture. In addition, the government should strengthen the construction of teaching staff, enrich international students' spiritual civilization through multiple channels, and create an environment of mutual respect and mutual understanding and recognition and identity [8]. The government should pay attention to and support international students in China for the continuous advancement of the institutional reform of higher education. Some scholars also point out that the openness and diversification of international relations and foreign policy are the main driving forces for the development of international student education in China. Education quality, cultural influence, and language difference are also important factors affecting the quality of international student development in China [9]. It summarizes the problems such as the small market share of overseas students in China, the low level of international education, the imbalance of major structure, and the large difference in management and training mode and quality between Chinese and foreign students [10].

The quality of international education in China is also a hot topic. Based on the “input–Environment–output (I-E-O)” theory, the Jiangsu University has constructed the “three-element (student source, training, employment) quality” guarantee model. The evaluation indicators include curriculum setting, management services for international students, quality of students, scientific research ability, tutor guidance and communication, international students’ understanding and attitude towards China, general skills training effect, language ability training effect, teaching content evaluation, and teaching method evaluation [11]. The international students’ cultural conflicts exist in the education of culture, cultural discrimination, and cultural one-way output problems, and put forward through the internationalization of education concept, construction, and campus classroom environment, improve teachers’ multicultural teaching ability, promote the Chinese foreign exchange and mutual learning, and other measures to help students adapt to difficulties [12–14].

### 3. The Cultivation Models of International Students in China’s Higher Education

#### 3.1. Model of Convergent Culture and Collaborative Culture

The converging cultivation model of international students in China means that international students and local students are enrolled in the same class and teachers implement the same talent training program and quality requirements and teach them in Chinese [15]. It clarified the important role of universities, courses, students, and other subjects in cross-cultural convergence, determined that the core of cross-cultural convergence is to return to the essence of education and put forward specific measures such as problem-oriented and results-oriented teaching methods and curriculum setting centering on students’ needs [16–19]. The collaborative training model has been clear about the domestic graduate students and the students graduate two subsystems, by pairing and academic exchanges, cross training courses, combining Chinese and foreign tutor teams, achieving localization in promoting unity and internationalization, and “introduced to” and “going out”. Some scholars also proposed a diversified collaborative training model that attaches importance to scientific research cooperation, curriculum innovation, team diversity, and reliable systems [20].

#### 3.2. Model of the Integration of Industry and Education

The main training modes of industry–education integration include time measures such as enterprise education funds for studying in China, school–enterprise joint development of training programs, and establishment of academic platforms represented by the “Belt and Road” Industry–Education Integration Research Institute. It puts forward the university–enterprise training scheme, the construction of the “dual system” talent training mode, and the combination of practical training platforms, building strict management, mechanism, and supervision systems for improving international career development [21].

#### 3.3. Model of the Monitoring-Based Quality Education

The international student’s cultivation quality promotion aims to support the foundation of the people and the significance of sustainable international education development, widen the channel of the enrollment and proposed admission threshold, build a brand course based on subject characteristics, mutually promote Chinese and foreign students training modes and Chinese and foreign cooperation base construction, and strengthen the support security system construction improvement methods. It focuses on the third-party guidance role of Higher Education Quality Standards for International Students (Trial) in improving the quality of international students’ training and proposed specific measures such as formulating characteristic courses, improving the feedback mechanism, improving the internationalization level and cross-cultural ability of teachers, and optimizing selection and assessment [22–24]. The specific measures to improve the training quality of overseas students in China is to combine recommendation with examination, adhering to the requirements of the school committee, construct an international faculty team, combine class attendance with class division, carry out scientific research through group cooperation,

and adopt strict management and regulations [25,26]. In addition, for the academic ability of international students, some studies put forward obstacles such as poor educational foundation, weak language ability, weak literature collection ability, disconnection between teaching content and training objectives, and a real guaranteed system. They proposed the implementation of a “tutor academic review system” and the establishment of an academic database and academic exchange mechanism [27–30]. The government-guided cultural integration and coordinated logistics support this (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The main cultivation models of international students in China.

The Main Cultivation Models of International Students in China		
Model	Requirements	Features
Differential culture model	According to international students’ educational background, needs and abilities, the courses, teaching, and evaluation are relatively independent	Separated from the local education system, students are taught according to their aptitude to meet the individual needs of international students
The convergent culture and collaborative culture model	Adopt similar training models and evaluation standards to local students and integrate courses, internships, and scientific research programs into unified planning	In the overall planning unity at the same time pay attention to individual differentiation training
Collaborative innovation training mode	While ensuring the individualized education needs of overseas students in China, we promote the joint participation of Chinese and foreign students in scientific research and innovation tasks, exchange learning experience, and effectively use specific training resources such as double tutors and the internationalization strategy	International students’ characteristic curriculum is combined with joint teaching and research tasks, emphasizing the ability of scientific research innovation and cooperation
The integration of industry and education model	Multi-subject joint design of the training program, participate in the training process	Cooperation between universities and enterprises, cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities, cooperation between universities and international organizations, and other specific forms

## 4. Method

### 4.1. The Basic Information Data Collection

We applied the qualitative method of Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI) to explore 23 international students’ opinions on their cultivation system for higher education sustainability in China [31]. The reason why we conducted the ILGI approach is that it concentrates on decreasing the communicative, cultural, and contextual differences and gaps at the margins that have historically muted underserved populations. The international students are considered as the underrepresented group in the Chinese contextual background. From May 2022 to October 2022, we conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant personnel in the training of overseas students in China. Before conducting this research, we have received the ethical approval from B university and each participant agreed to engage in this study.

The pandemic plays a role in participants’ physical locations and thus influences their experiences on international students’ daily learning activities. All the selected participants have signed the consent letter. We could provide more details on how the students were selected. Because this is research situated in the field of education, it is crucial to obtain information on participants’ demographics. The age of the selected participant ranges from 20 to 26. All the international students received the Chinese governmental scholarship. As previous research on international students has shown, the demographics significantly impact students’ learning journeys. All the sampled international students were selected from several national and local universities in China (See Table 2). Due to the epidemic

situation, various methods of “online + offline” were used for the interviews, including one-to-one interviews, telephone interviews, and online interviews. The average duration of each interview was 15–20 min and the main core questions were as follows: 1. In your opinion, what are the training modes for overseas students in China under the new situation? What are the problems? How to solve it? 2. What do you think of the current situation of the use of funds for students studying in China under the new situation? What are the problems? How to solve it? After the interview was completed, the relevant research members began to export the interview text and process the relevant text data. They used NVivo software to code the interview data and, combined with the basic views of the previous literature research, sorted out the three levels of coding and analyzed and processed them one by one.

**Table 2.** The interviewees’ detail information.

No.	Age	Gender	Major	Affiliations
1	24	Male	Mathematics	National University A
2	24	Female	Chinese language and culture	Local University D
3	26	Male	Education and management	National University A
4	23	Male	Education and management	Local University D
5	22	Male	Economics	National University B
6	21	Female	Chinese language and culture	Local University E
7	20	Female	Education and management	Local University E
8	22	Female	Chinese language and culture	National University B
9	21	Male	Education and management	Local University D
10	20	Female	Education and management	Local University D
11	21	Male	Mathematics	National University A
12	20	Female	Chinese language and culture	National University B
13	19	Male	Economics	National University A
14	24	Female	Chinese language and culture	Local University F
15	23	Male	Education and management	National University A
16	26	Female	Chinese language and culture	Local University E
17	22	Male	Education and management	National University B
18	21	Female	Chinese language and culture	National University C
19	19	Female	Education and management	National University B
20	19	Male	Chinese language and culture	National University B
21	20	Female	Chinese language and culture	National University C
22	22	Male	Economics	Local University F
23	23	Male	Education and management	National University C

#### 4.2. The ILGI Process and Procedure

The Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI) was organically and iteratively developed over time owing to active learning and living engagements, learning feedback, and guidance of the assigned international students in five of China’s higher education institutions [32]. The following subsections describe several aspects, including the preparation for the first interviews with participants, building trust and ensuring inclusivity with selected participants, building friendly culturally appropriate discourses and local-centric inquiries, and arranging various effective discussions with participants to figure out the research questions. We initially prepared relevant material for the first interview [33]. At the beginning of this research, we visited various international courses in different higher

education institutions. In addition, we collected both textual and visual discourses and texts, such as relevant international student cultivation, curriculum, and policy documents. Most of these discourses and files were drawn or posted by the national and local governments and higher education institutions. Then, we conducted the second step to provide international culturally appropriate images to closely and friendly contact with sampled international students.

In the first step of the interview, we shared information about our research and the interview process with the international students. Based on the cultural and geological features of selected international students, we carefully maintained question directions and contents and initiated the interviews by showing different kinds of examples, cases, and news. While the interviewees agreed to some of the arguments or points, they advised us to include some more contextual issues as key points. In the next step of visual representations, we conducted various friendly communications on learning, teaching, and living in China and the participants shared lots of their real stories on their learning experiences in China's higher education institutions. For the third step of the subsequent interviews, the selected international students shared with us much about their actual concerns and feelings on the cultivation system of international education development. We also added some discussion themes on how to promote the cultivation system for promoting the quality of international student development in China's higher education institutions. In the step of the co-creation of discussion, we paid much attention to the aspects of individual interactions and, during the interview process, we encouraged the selected interviewees to not only provide multiple personal perspectives but also to add different discussions on how to provide some effective strategies to deal with those challenges.

The advantage of applying Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI) is to build trust and ensure inclusivity among participants. The ILGI process supported international students to physically and emotionally verify different research questions and relevant discussion themes based on different contextual backgrounds. In addition, in the step of local-centric inquiry, we asked predefined/determined questions relying solely on the previous data. To make interviews more flexible and accessible, we also make interview processes more accessible and make the questions more accessible and logical. Different from other technology-dependent photo/video interview methods, we can use ILGI in both indoor and outdoor settings within a variety of conditions. In a nutshell, this approach could support interviewees for friendly and trustable identification and clarify different research questions contextually and culturally. The interviewees' detail is provided in Table 2.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. The Cultivation Quality of International Student Needs to Be Promoted

Some participants argue that, due to the large differences in cultural background and weak Chinese language ability, international students feel role conflicts and cultural inadaptability, resulting in lack of endogenous motivation in China's higher education system.

I am an international student in B university, majoring in higher education management. I think the biggest challenges of the cultivation of international students is the cultural differences and adaptation. It is not easy to study Chinese various cultures. (Interviewee No.21)

The cultivation structure of international students should be more scientific. Some interviewees highlighted that the problems in the international education process include: the international student cultivation program follows the hard set, ignoring the education basis of international students, and individual educational needs.

From my personal experience, I found that the degree of internationalization of the curriculum for international students is not high, the professional characteristics are missing, the training of personalized diversification is insufficient, and the training mode is single. The degree of internationalization of teaching methods is insufficient, the teaching methods are outdated and innovative, the

bilingual teaching is relatively separated, and the teaching methods such as group discussion, cooperative scientific research and theory combined with practice are relatively missing. (Interviewee No.11)

Additionally, most of the cultivation systems of international students is copied and applied from other foreign universities. The faculty for international students lacks the recognition of the international attributes of higher education and the enterprise practice of foreign students is hindered and the demand for professional skills acquisition is ignored.

The internationalization level of the teaching staff is insufficient, which leads to the difficulty of satisfying the demand for personalized education, and further causes the dislocation of talent demand and talent training. The management system is unreasonable, the integration of educational resources is poor, and the utilization rate is low, the daily life security is missing, and the continuous investment is insufficient. (Interviewee No.8)

In addition, the cultivation model of international students in China needs to pay much more attention to the characteristics of international students' specific majors. Some participants highlighted that the cultivation process of international students in China's higher education institutions lacks professional characteristics.

I think the main problems in the education outcome stage are that the economic benefits of the training mode of studying in China are not significant, and the scale of self-funded studying in China is insufficient, which leads to less direct economic benefits. There are few opportunities for overseas students to work in China after graduation, and the benefits of income generation are weak. (Interviewee No.13)

Some participants also provided some approaches to improve the cultivation process of international students in China. The government should adhere to the connotative development and optimize the curriculum. They should strengthen interactive seminars, bilingual teaching, and humanistic quality education, so as to achieve rich and diverse curriculum construction, prominent specialty construction characteristics, teaching content in line with international standards, and create an international brand of education with Chinese characteristics.

From my perspectives, I think the teaching and research mode should be optimized. Adopting convergent teaching management and collaborative teaching innovation, promoting joint scientific research, mutual promotion, and ideological exchange between Chinese and foreign students. Through exchange programs and professional training, cross-cultural competence, teaching and research enthusiasm and comprehensive quality of teachers are improved. (Interviewee No.6)

## *5.2. The Cultivation Funding Support of International Student Needs to Be Diversified*

Some participants also argued that the problems in the use of funds for international students in China mainly lie in scholarship and tuition. However, in the use of scholarship, there are some problems, such as unreasonable composition of scholarship, unscientific evaluation, unhealthy orientation, non-standard use, and insignificant effect.

From my own experience, I found the scholarship system is not sound enough, the types and coverage of awards are limited, the form is relatively single, the setting is scientific, and the precision of delivery is insufficient, and the threshold of scholarships is low, and the blind distribution is not enough. (Interviewee No.14)

Some participants also pointed out that the application is not standardized and there are problems in the whole process of scholarship selection and distribution, such as insufficient publicity, different standards, low transparency, great obstacles in cross-cultural management, and uneven management systems.

The evaluation criteria are single, focusing too much on academic performance and neglecting social performance and ideological morality. The unhealthy orientation makes it difficult to realize the positive attraction effect of scholarship on high-quality students, which misleads international students into scholarship path dependence and short-term economic interest orientation, resulting in the dilemma of studying in China by trading capital for talents. (Interviewee No.22)

Among universities, different policies and documents on tuition fees for international students in China result in the lack of unified guidance from local governments, which makes it difficult for universities to play a coordinating role, leading to the lack of both the uniqueness of local needs and the lack of coordinated and unified standardization in university practices.

I realized that the results are not significant, and the application of scholarships is often missing, which makes it difficult to play the function of stimulating learning and helping international students cultivate sustainable learning ability, leading to the waste of resources and low social benefits. (Interviewee No.12)

Within universities and colleges, there is a contradiction between the attributes of private education products for self-funded students studying in China and the unified tuition pricing policy. Several participants argued that most universities enjoy the autonomy of enrollment but do not have the decision of tuition pricing and there is a large gap in the source of compensation between self-funded students studying in China and students receiving scholarships. As a result, the tuition fee and the associated scholarship per student allocation system have a one-size-fits-all blindness.

The mode of innovative financial allocation is changed from “unified allocation system” to “project system”. Colleges and universities optimize grass-roots practice, integrate resources and information to improve work efficiency, construct multidimensional evaluation indicators, strengthen standardized management, optimize work procedures, standardize fee flow and other measures. (Interviewee No.1)

The government should advance institutional reform and standardize the practice process. We should improve the system of introduction, use, evaluation, and monitoring of scholarships to ensure that the scholarships for international students in China have a guiding role in continuously inspiring students to become talents.

## 6. Discussion

Along with the results above, we found that the government needs to improve policies, regulations, and top-level design for the cultivation system of international students in China.

Based on the results, we found that government should improve the enrollment mechanism and the diversified cultivation system. The government should understand the educational background of the students' countries of origin, effectively use domestic and foreign enrollment institutions and relevant education departments and increase the enrollment publicity and the popularization of overseas study knowledge [34–36]. Multiple channels, such as the application system, examination system, and tutor recommendation system should be applied simultaneously. It is necessary to strengthen preparatory education to reduce cross-cultural and cross-cultural barriers for international students in China [37]. In addition, along with the results, we suggest that institutions should optimize the cultivation concept of overseas students in China. In addition, universities and colleges should establish the overall awareness of integrating educational resources, enriching teaching, research levels, and academic service to society and establish the strategic awareness of studying in China based on reality and serving society [38–40].

Moreover, the institutions should establish the administrative management, supervision, and review system [41–45]. Colleges and universities are equipped with special international affairs management departments, which improve management efficiency

through the lecture system and the teaching process of students' evaluation and feedback, internal meetings, and teacher–student exchange meetings and standardize daily behaviors through academic early warnings and communication with instructors [46–50]. In addition, institutions should build the dynamic monitoring of scholarship systems. It is necessary to ensure the life of international students and enhance their enthusiasm for teaching and learning [51–56]. Institutions need to optimize the use of funds and establish a multi-channel funding system. Compared with the international student cultivation system in foreign countries, such as the U.S., U.K., and Canada, we found that they concentrate on the reform and reflection of the current teaching system, teaching method, and practice teaching mode of the comprehensive skills for international students. To improve international students' comprehensive quality as the goal, the U.S., U.K., and Canada tend to strengthen the learning skills to cultivate international students' basic communication abilities and skills. For example, in the cultivation of international students, the PBL (Problem-Based Learning) teaching method is considered an important tool to improve the level of international students [57–65].

## 7. Conclusions

The novelty or difference of this research is that it explores international students' opinions on their cultivation system at higher education institutions in China using the qualitative approach of Iconic Legisigns-Guided Interviewing (ILGI), compared with other similar studies. It is found that there are some challenges to promoting the quality of international students' cultivation system in China. To sum up, the government should shift to the role of “monitor”, promote the combination of legislative reform and policy unification, and play the main role of fiscal input in China's higher education system.

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