

Cross-Cultural Psychological Support System for International Students in Chinese Vocational Colleges: An Evidence-Based Three-Tiered Intervention Framework

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Abstract: *The internationalization of China's higher vocational education has brought increasing numbers of international students to vocational colleges, yet systematic psychological support systems tailored to this population remain underdeveloped. Drawing upon empirical data from 212 international students across three Jiangsu vocational colleges, this study proposes a three-tiered psychological support framework grounded in the evidence-based public health intervention model. Quantitative findings reveal that 47.6% of participants exhibit significant psychological adaptation difficulties, with HSK Level 3 serving as a critical threshold (below Level 3: $M=2.76$; Level 3+: $M=3.31$). Teacher support ($\beta=0.245$, $p<0.001$) and Chinese peer support ($\beta=0.132$, $p=0.018$) emerge as significant protective factors, while third-year students demonstrate the highest vulnerability ($M=2.87$, $SD=0.76$). Qualitative thematic analysis identifies four support gap clusters: language support insufficiency, mental health service inaccessibility, cultural orientation inadequacy, and professional identity underdevelopment. The proposed framework integrates universal prevention (Tier 1: institutional culture building, language support intensification, and teacher capacity development), targeted intervention (Tier 2: HSK Level 3 threshold-based academic support, structured peer mentoring, and cultural orientation enhancement), and intensive care (Tier 3: crisis identification protocols, multilingual counseling access, and final-year transition programs). This framework offers vocational institutions a data-driven, operationally feasible roadmap for transforming fragmented support efforts into a coordinated, evidence-based system that addresses the distinct needs of international students in skills-oriented, short-duration programs.*

Keywords: Psychological support system, International students, Vocational education, Three-tiered intervention, Cross-cultural adaptation, Evidence-based practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Growing Need for Psychological Support in Vocational Education

China has emerged as Asia's largest destination country for international students, with vocational colleges enrolling approximately 5% of all international students, primarily from Belt and Road Initiative countries (Xiao, 2021). These institutions prioritize technical competency development, industry partnerships, and practical skills training, preparing students for direct workforce entry. However, the psychological well-being of this growing student population has received insufficient institutional attention.

International students in vocational colleges face unique challenges that distinguish them from their university counterparts. They typically enroll in shorter programs (2-3 years), possess lower Chinese language proficiency upon arrival (often HSK Level 3 or below), and navigate a more applied, industry-embedded learning environment (Lu, 2019). These characteristics create a compressed adaptation timeline, intensifying psychological stress during an already challenging transition period. Recent research has documented that over 50% of vocational international students exhibit psychological maladaptation symptoms (Qiu, 2023; Qiu, 2021), indicating a systemic problem requiring institutional intervention.

Despite this documented need, systematic psychological support systems specifically designed for vocational college international students remain largely absent. Existing support efforts are often fragmented, reactive, and based on intuition rather than empirical evidence. Institutions typically offer generic counseling services designed for domestic students, with limited consideration of language barriers, cultural differences in help-seeking behavior, and the distinct stressors associated with vocational education. This gap between documented need and actual provision constitutes a critical area for institutional development.

1.2 The Theoretical Foundation for Support System Design

The design of effective psychological support systems must be grounded in established theoretical frameworks that explain adaptation processes and identify intervention leverage points. Ward and Kennedy's (1999) dual-dimensional model distinguishes between psychological adaptation (emotional well-being) and sociocultural adaptation (behavioral competence), suggesting that support interventions must address both affective and practical dimensions of adaptation. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework identifies integration—maintaining heritage culture while adopting host culture practices—as the optimal adaptation strategy, implying that support systems should facilitate bicultural competence rather than assimilation.

The public health prevention model provides a structural framework for organizing support services. This model, widely adopted in school mental health contexts, organizes interventions into three tiers: universal prevention (Tier 1) for all students, targeted intervention (Tier 2) for at-risk subgroups, and intensive care (Tier 3) for students with severe difficulties (Durlak et al., 2011). This tiered structure ensures efficient resource allocation while providing appropriate levels of support based on individual need. The model has been successfully adapted for international student support in university settings (Yoon & Portman, 2004), though its application to vocational education contexts remains unexplored.

1.3 Empirical Evidence for Intervention Priorities

Recent empirical research has identified specific factors that predict psychological adaptation among vocational international students, providing evidence-based guidance for prioritizing support resources. A study of 212 international students across three Jiangsu vocational colleges found that Chinese language competence (HSK level) was the strongest predictor of psychological adaptation ($\beta=0.342$, $p<0.001$), with students below HSK Level 3 reporting significantly lower adaptation scores ($M=2.76$) than those at Level 3 or above ($M=3.31$) (Hu et al., 2026). Teacher support ($\beta=0.245$, $p<0.001$) demonstrated stronger effects than Chinese peer support ($\beta=0.132$, $p=0.018$), while co-national support was not significant in the final model.

Temporal patterns reveal that third-year students report the lowest adaptation scores ($M=2.87$, $SD=0.76$), suggesting a critical crisis phase in the final year (Hu et al., 2026). Qualitative data from the same study identified four support gap clusters: insufficient language support, inaccessible mental health services, inadequate cultural orientation, and underdeveloped professional identity. Female students reported significantly lower adaptation ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.81$) than males ($M=3.36$, $SD=0.74$), indicating gender as a vulnerability factor requiring consideration in support system design.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to translate empirical evidence into an actionable support framework by achieving three objectives: (1) synthesizing available evidence on adaptation difficulties and support needs among vocational international students to identify evidence-based intervention priorities; (2) designing a three-tiered psychological support system that addresses documented gaps while remaining feasible within vocational institutional resources; and (3) providing operational guidelines for implementation, including assessment protocols, intervention content, and evaluation metrics. The framework is intended to serve as a practical guide for vocational college administrators, counselors, and faculty seeking to transform fragmented support efforts into a coordinated, evidence-based system.

2. EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS: UNDERSTANDING THE SUPPORT LANDSCAPE

2.1 The Prevalence and Nature of Psychological Difficulties

Empirical data from three Jiangsu vocational colleges reveal that 47.6% of international students ($n=101$ out of 212) report significant psychological adaptation difficulties, scoring below the midpoint threshold of 2.5 on a 5-point psychological adaptation scale (Hu et al., 2026). The mean adaptation score of 3.24 ($SD=0.78$) indicates moderate adaptation levels overall, though the substantial proportion scoring below threshold signals a systemic problem requiring institutional attention.

The nature of these difficulties is multidimensional. Quantitative data indicate that psychological distress manifests across emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and psychological functioning domains. Qualitative interviews illuminate specific manifestations: participants describe feelings of frustration, helplessness, social

isolation, and identity confusion. A second-year student from Indonesia reported: “In the shop, at the hospital, I just freeze. I feel like a child” (Hu et al., 2026, Theme 1). A third-year student from Nigeria described: “Sometimes I don’t know who I am anymore” (Theme 2). These accounts suggest that psychological difficulties extend beyond transient discomfort to fundamental challenges to identity and self-efficacy.

2.2 Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Language Competence as the Critical Threshold. HSK level emerged as the strongest predictor of psychological adaptation, with a clear dose-response relationship. Mean adaptation scores increased systematically with HSK level: Below Level 3 ($M=2.76$, $SD=0.69$), Level 3 ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.74$), Level 4 ($M=3.38$, $SD=0.76$), and Level 5 or above ($M=3.71$, $SD=0.65$) (Hu et al., 2026). This pattern suggests that HSK Level 3 represents a critical threshold: students below this level are at substantially higher risk for psychological difficulties.

Qualitative data explain why language competence matters beyond functional communication. Participants described the emotional impact of language barriers as identity-threatening rather than merely inconvenient. The mismatch between classroom and real-world communication competence compounds this distress: students who perform adequately on tests nevertheless experience helplessness in daily interactions. This suggests that language support must address both academic and functional language needs.

Social Support: Teacher Primacy and Peer Potential. Teacher support demonstrated the strongest association with psychological adaptation ($r=0.48$; $\beta=0.245$, $p<0.001$ in the final model), exceeding both Chinese peer support ($r=0.36$; $\beta=0.132$, $p=0.018$) and co-national support ($r=0.34$; $\beta=0.087$, n.s.) (Hu et al., 2026). The significance of teacher support may reflect the unique relational structure of vocational education, where teachers often serve as role models, particularly in programs with industry-expert instructors.

However, qualitative data reveal that Chinese peer support, while statistically significant, is limited in practice. Participants reported minimal meaningful interaction with Chinese classmates, citing shyness, scheduling differences, and lack of facilitated opportunities. This finding suggests that the potential protective effects of peer support remain unrealized due to structural barriers rather than student disinterest. A participant from Myanmar explained: “I have Chinese classmates but we don’t talk much. They are busy with their own things, and I’m shy. Sometimes I eat alone” (Hu et al., 2026, Theme 3).

Temporal Vulnerability: The Third-Year Crisis. Third-year students reported significantly lower adaptation scores ($M=2.87$, $SD=0.76$) than first-year ($M=3.35$, $SD=0.75$) and second-year ($M=3.29$, $SD=0.77$) students ($F(2,209)=5.67$, $p=0.004$) (Hu et al., 2026). This pattern, consistent with the W-shaped adaptation trajectory (Qiu, 2021), suggests that the final year represents a period of heightened vulnerability. Qualitative data indicate this crisis reflects anxiety about the transition from campus to workforce, compounded by ongoing language and cultural competence concerns. This temporal pattern is particularly significant for vocational programs, where shorter duration compresses the adaptation timeline and may intensify final-year stress.

Gender as a Vulnerability Factor. Female participants reported significantly lower psychological adaptation scores ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.81$) than males ($M=3.36$, $SD=0.74$), $t(210)=3.24$, $p=0.001$ (Hu et al., 2026). This pattern, consistent with prior research (Qiu, 2023), suggests that female international students face additional challenges warranting attention in support system design.

2.3 Documented Support Gaps

Qualitative findings from 15 interviews identified four thematic clusters of institutional support gaps:

Insufficient Language Support. Participants consistently reported that the three-month pre-semester language program was inadequate for program readiness: “When we started engineering classes, I understood almost nothing” (P09, Male, Year 1, Marine Engineering). The limited duration and lack of content-specific language instruction leave students unable to engage meaningfully with technical content, compounding psychological distress.

Inaccessible Mental Health Services. Participants reported limited awareness of available counseling services and cultural barriers to utilization: “There is a counseling center but I don’t know how to make appointment. Also,

I don't want people to know I have problems. In my culture, mental health is not something you talk about" (P12, Female, Year 2). This gap is particularly concerning given the documented prevalence of psychological difficulties.

Inadequate Cultural Orientation. The one-week orientation covering school rules was perceived as insufficient: "No one told me how to use the hospital, how to make friends with Chinese students, what to do if I feel lonely" (P02, Male, Year 1). Practical skills for daily living and coping strategies for emotional challenges were notably absent.

Underdeveloped Professional Identity. Participants who formed stronger professional identity reported better adaptation: "This goal helps me keep going. My teachers who were captains—they tell us stories about working on ships. I want to be like them" (P14, Male, Year 3). However, professional identity development was not systematically supported through institutional programming, representing an untapped resource for psychological resilience.

3. THE THREE-TIERED SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

3.1 Framework Overview

Based on the evidence synthesis, this study proposes a three-tiered psychological support system adapted from the public health prevention model (Durlak et al., 2011) and tailored to the vocational education context. The framework operates on the principle of proportional universalism: providing universal support for all students while ensuring targeted and intensive resources for those at higher risk. This approach maximizes population-level impact while efficiently allocating limited resources.

Table 1: Three-Tiered Support Framework for Vocational International Students

Tier	Target Population	Intervention Focus	Example Strategies
Tier 1: Universal Prevention	All international students	Building supportive institutional culture; developing foundational competencies	Institutional culture enhancement; language support intensification; teacher capacity building; peer interaction facilitation
Tier 2: Targeted Intervention	At-risk subgroups (HSK <3; female students; final-year students)	Addressing specific vulnerability factors; building protective resources	HSK threshold-based academic support; structured peer mentoring; enhanced cultural orientation; professional identity programming
Tier 3: Intensive Care	Students with severe difficulties or crisis situations	Providing individualized, multi-disciplinary support	Crisis identification and referral protocols; multilingual counseling access; final-year transition support; case management

3.2 Tier 1: Universal Prevention for All International Students

Tier 1 interventions are provided to all international students regardless of risk status. These foundational interventions aim to build institutional capacity, develop student competencies, and create a supportive environment that prevents adaptation difficulties from developing or escalating.

Institutional Culture Enhancement. Institutions should foster a campus culture that values cultural diversity and actively promotes inclusion. Specific strategies include: (a) public recognition of international students' contributions through events and communications; (b) integration of intercultural competence training into all student orientation programs, including for domestic students; (c) establishment of language and cultural exchange spaces where international and domestic students can interact informally; and (d) visible institutional commitment to diversity, including administrative positions dedicated to international student welfare.

Language Support Intensification. Given the primacy of language competence for psychological adaptation, institutions should implement comprehensive language support at the universal level. This includes: (a) extending pre-semester language training from three months to a minimum of four months, with emphasis on both general and technical vocabulary; (b) providing ongoing language support throughout the program, including content-based language instruction integrated with major courses; (c) developing language assessment protocols that distinguish between academic and functional competence to identify specific areas needing improvement; and (d) establishing language mentorship programs pairing international students with advanced Chinese peers or trained volunteers.

Teacher Capacity Building. The strong association between teacher support and psychological adaptation

($\beta=0.245$) indicates that faculty development is a high-impact institutional investment. This includes: (a) training teachers to recognize signs of psychological distress and appropriate referral pathways; (b) developing culturally responsive teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles and backgrounds; (c) establishing faculty mentorship programs that intentionally pair teachers with international student mentees; and (d) creating institutional recognition for teachers who demonstrate exceptional support for international students.

Peer Interaction Facilitation. Given the gap between potential and actual peer support, institutions should intentionally facilitate meaningful cross-cultural interaction. Specific strategies include: (a) establishing structured “buddy systems” pairing each international student with a trained Chinese student volunteer for the first academic year; (b) integrating international and domestic students in project-based learning activities, study groups, and extracurricular activities; (c) providing incentives for domestic student participation in international student support activities; and (d) organizing regular social events designed to foster cross-cultural friendship development.

3.3 Tier 2: Targeted Intervention for At-Risk Subgroups

Tier 2 interventions address specific vulnerability factors identified through empirical research. These interventions are directed toward students who are at elevated risk for psychological difficulties, enabling early identification and prevention of severe problems.

HSK Level 3 Threshold-Based Academic Support. The evidence indicates that HSK Level 3 represents a critical threshold: students below this level have substantially higher risk of adaptation difficulties ($M=2.76$ vs. $M=3.31$). Specific interventions include: (a) mandatory academic language support for students below HSK Level 3, including additional language classes and tutoring; (b) course content modifications, such as supplementary bilingual materials or extended time for assignments; (c) regular language progress monitoring to identify students who are not advancing; and (d) academic advising specifically addressing the language demands of major courses.

Structured Peer Mentoring Systems. While universal peer interaction facilitation aims to build social connections, targeted peer mentoring provides structured support for at-risk students. Specific strategies include: (a) training student mentors in active listening, cultural sensitivity, and appropriate referral protocols; (b) matching mentors and mentees based on academic programs, cultural backgrounds, and specific needs; (c) establishing regular check-in schedules and structured mentoring activities; and (d) providing mentor supervision and ongoing training to maintain quality.

Enhanced Cultural Orientation. The current one-week orientation is insufficient. Enhanced orientation for at-risk groups should: (a) extend orientation duration to a minimum of two weeks; (b) include practical skills modules on using health services, banking, transportation, and other daily life essentials; (c) provide relational skills training on making Chinese friends, understanding social norms, and navigating cultural expectations; (d) offer psychological coping strategies, including stress management, help-seeking behavior, and cultural adjustment techniques; and (e) conduct orientation in multiple languages to ensure comprehension.

Professional Identity Programming. The finding that professional identity serves as a protective resource suggests that intentional programming can build this psychological buffer. Specific strategies include: (a) integrating career and vocational identity development into the curriculum, including industry guest speakers and company visits; (b) providing early and frequent exposure to professional role models, particularly those with international backgrounds or experiences; (c) establishing mentoring relationships with industry professionals; and (d) creating opportunities for practical experience that connect classroom learning to professional aspirations.

3.4 Tier 3: Intensive Care for Students with Severe Difficulties

Tier 3 interventions provide individualized, intensive support for students experiencing severe psychological difficulties or crisis situations. These interventions require coordination among counseling, academic, and administrative services.

Crisis Identification and Referral Protocols. Institutions should establish clear procedures for identifying students in crisis and connecting them to appropriate services. This includes: (a) training all faculty and staff to recognize crisis indicators, including withdrawal, academic decline, expressions of hopelessness, and help-seeking behavior; (b) establishing a centralized referral system that minimizes barriers to service access; (c) developing

cultural protocols for approaching students who may not voluntarily seek help due to cultural stigma; and (d) creating confidential pathways that address students' concerns about privacy and cultural perceptions of mental health.

Multilingual Counseling Services. The documented gap between mental health needs and service utilization is exacerbated by language and cultural barriers. Specific strategies include: (a) providing counseling services in students' preferred languages, utilizing either bilingual counselors or professional interpreters; (b) developing culturally adapted counseling approaches that consider cultural explanations of distress, help-seeking preferences, and treatment expectations; (c) offering outreach services that proactively connect with international students rather than relying on self-referral; and (d) providing services in accessible campus locations and via multiple modalities (in-person, telephone, and telehealth).

Final-Year Transition Support. The third-year crisis documented in the empirical research ($M=2.87$, $SD=0.76$) warrants targeted intensive intervention. Specific strategies include: (a) comprehensive career transition preparation, including job search skills, interview practice, and understanding of local workplace culture; (b) enhanced counseling availability during the final year, with proactive outreach to students showing signs of distress; (c) alumni mentoring programs connecting graduating students with successful alumni in their fields; and (d) post-graduation follow-up to monitor transition success and provide ongoing support as needed.

Coordinated Case Management. For students with complex or severe difficulties, institutions should provide coordinated case management that addresses multiple domains simultaneously. This includes: (a) a designated coordinator responsible for overseeing support across counseling, academic, financial, and social domains; (b) regular multi-disciplinary case reviews involving faculty, counselors, administrators, and when appropriate, family members; (c) individualized support plans with clear goals, interventions, and progress monitoring; and (d) transition planning that ensures continuity of support when students move between service providers or from campus to community.

4. IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

4.1 Assessment and Identification Procedures

Effective implementation requires systematic procedures for identifying students who need varying levels of support.

Universal Screening. All international students should participate in a comprehensive adaptation assessment during their initial weeks on campus. The assessment should include validated measures of psychological adaptation (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1999), perceived social support, language self-efficacy, and psychological capital. Results should be used for program planning and identifying students at elevated risk.

Ongoing Monitoring. Regular monitoring should occur at predetermined intervals, typically at the conclusion of each semester. Changes in adaptation scores should trigger appropriate responses: notable declines warrant Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention, while stable positive scores indicate that Tier 1 support is sufficient. The third-year assessment should include additional transition-specific measures.

Referral Protocols. Clear referral pathways should be established and communicated to all faculty and staff. These protocols should specify: (a) indicators that prompt referral; (b) the appropriate referral destination for different types of concerns; (c) procedures for confidential referral; and (d) follow-up responsibilities. All referrals should include attention to cultural sensitivity and stigma concerns.

4.2 Staffing and Resource Allocation

Designated Coordinator. Each vocational college should designate a staff member responsible for overseeing international student psychological support. This coordinator should have training in mental health, cultural competence, and cross-cultural communication. Responsibilities include program coordination, service monitoring, and quality assurance.

Counseling Resources. Institutions should allocate resources for counseling specifically dedicated to international students. This may require hiring additional bilingual counselors, funding interpreter services, or

establishing partnerships with external providers. Minimum recommended staffing is one counselor per 200 international students, with additional language and cultural competence requirements.

Faculty Engagement. Faculty development requires dedicated resources, including training workshops, continuing education opportunities, and recognition systems. Institutions should allocate time and funding for faculty participation in international student support activities, including mentorship, cultural advising, and language support.

Technology Infrastructure. Implementation requires adequate technology support, including multilingual online resources, counseling platforms, and secure communication channels. Institutions should invest in technology that facilitates access to services for students with language barriers and limited awareness of available resources.

4.3 Implementation Timeline

Phase 1: Needs Assessment and Planning (0-3 months). Activities include conducting a comprehensive needs assessment of the current international student population, reviewing existing support services and identifying gaps, establishing a planning committee with multi-stakeholder representation, and developing a detailed implementation plan with timelines and responsibilities.

Phase 2: Foundation Building (3-6 months). Activities include developing universal screening and referral protocols, providing Tier 1 faculty and staff training, establishing peer mentoring and buddy systems, and developing multilingual support materials.

Phase 3: Targeted and Intensive Intervention Development (6-9 months). Activities include establishing HSK threshold-based support protocols, developing enhanced cultural orientation programs, establishing counseling and crisis referral services, and developing Tier 3 individualized support protocols.

Phase 4: Implementation and Evaluation (9-18 months). Activities include rolling out all three tiers of intervention, monitoring implementation fidelity and service utilization, collecting outcome data for evaluation purposes, and making evidence-based adjustments to the framework.

4.4 Evaluation and Quality Improvement

Process Indicators. Institutions should track: (a) percentage of international students receiving each tier of support; (b) utilization rates for counseling and other services; (c) faculty and staff participation in training; and (d) implementation fidelity for each intervention.

Outcome Indicators. Institutions should assess: (a) changes in psychological adaptation scores over time; (b) rates of psychological maladaptation compared to baseline; (c) academic performance indicators for international students; and (d) retention and graduation rates.

Stakeholder Feedback. Regular feedback from all stakeholders—students, faculty, staff, and administrators—should inform ongoing quality improvement. This includes student satisfaction surveys, stakeholder focus groups, and feedback mechanisms that allow for anonymous reporting of concerns and suggestions.

Annual Review. Institutions should conduct an annual comprehensive review of international student psychological support, examining process indicators, outcome data, stakeholder feedback, and emerging research evidence. Results should guide systematic improvements and resource allocation decisions.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This framework makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the public health prevention model (Durlak et al., 2011) to the vocational international student context, demonstrating how a population-based approach can be adapted to address specific vulnerability factors identified through empirical research. The model's proportional universalism principle is particularly well-suited for contexts where resources are limited but

need is substantial, enabling efficient allocation based on documented risk.

Second, the framework bridges the gap between cross-cultural adaptation theory and institutional practice. Ward's dual-dimensional model and Berry's acculturation framework have been extensively applied in research, but their translation to institutional support systems has been limited. The proposed framework operationalizes theoretical concepts into specific interventions, providing a practical pathway for translating evidence into action.

Third, the framework introduces the concept of "temporal scaffolding" — recognizing that adaptation needs evolve over time, with specific periods of heightened vulnerability (e.g., the third-year crisis). This extends prior research that has described adaptation trajectories (Qiu, 2021) by proposing specific interventions tailored to different adaptation phases.

5.2 Practical Implications

For Vocational Institutions. The framework provides a roadmap for moving beyond fragmented, reactive support to coordinated, evidence-based systems. Institutions can use the framework to: (a) assess current services against evidence-based standards; (b) identify priorities for development based on documented gaps; (c) allocate resources more effectively by matching intervention intensity to need; and (d) evaluate progress through systematic data collection.

For Faculty and Staff. The framework clarifies roles and responsibilities across multiple stakeholders. Faculty understand their responsibilities for universal prevention (culturally responsive teaching) and early identification; counseling staff understand their role in Tier 3 interventions; administrators understand their role in resource allocation and system coordination. This clarity enhances accountability and improves service delivery.

For Students. The tiered approach ensures that all students receive some level of support while providing more intensive services to those who need them most. Students understand what services are available, how to access them, and what to expect at different levels of need. This transparency is particularly important for international students who may be unfamiliar with institutional support structures and cultural expectations around help-seeking.

5.3 Feasibility Considerations

The proposed framework is designed to be feasible within the resource constraints typical of vocational institutions. Tier 1 interventions require primarily policy changes, faculty development, and administrative coordination—investments with relatively low marginal costs. Tier 2 interventions require moderate additional resources but leverage existing structures (e.g., academic advising, tutoring, peer programs). Tier 3 interventions require the most resources but serve the smallest number of students. This graduated investment structure ensures that institutions can achieve substantial population-level impact even with limited resources.

Implementation may be phased, with institutions beginning with Tier 1 foundational interventions (which address the needs of all students and have the largest population impact), then progressively adding Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. This phased approach allows institutions to build capacity and demonstrate success before expanding services.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

The framework has several limitations that should be addressed in future development. First, it is based on data from three Jiangsu institutions, limiting generalizability to other regions and institutional types. Validation across diverse vocational institutions in different provinces would strengthen the framework's applicability.

Second, the framework focuses primarily on institutional interventions, with limited consideration of broader contextual factors (e.g., community support, social policy) that also influence international student well-being. Future development should incorporate community engagement, family involvement, and policy advocacy as complementary components.

Third, outcome data for the proposed interventions are not yet available. Empirical validation of the framework's effectiveness is an urgent priority for future research, including randomized controlled trials of specific interventions and quasi-experimental studies of full implementation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has proposed a three-tiered psychological support framework for international students in Chinese vocational colleges, grounded in empirical evidence from 212 students across three Jiangsu institutions. The framework addresses documented support gaps while building on protective factors: language support intensification, teacher capacity building, structured peer support, and professional identity development at the universal level; HSK Level 3 threshold-based support, enhanced cultural orientation, and structured peer mentoring at the targeted level; and crisis referral protocols, multilingual counseling access, and final-year transition support at the intensive level.

The framework represents a significant advance over current fragmented approaches by providing a coordinated, evidence-based, and operationally feasible model that can be systematically implemented and evaluated. As China continues to internationalize its vocational education sector, the development of systematic psychological support systems is essential for fulfilling institutional responsibilities to international students and achieving the broader goals of the Belt and Road Initiative's talent development strategy (Chen & Jiang, 2021). This framework offers a practical pathway for transforming empirical evidence into institutional action, ensuring that vocational colleges can effectively support the psychological well-being of their increasingly diverse international student population.

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