

Invisible Transition Barriers: Unpacking Academic Support Mismatches for Freshmen in Chinese Higher Education

Zihao Liu¹, Xin Huang², Yuzhuo Cai², Xinyue Guo³, Tianai Mao⁴

¹University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom. ²Xi'an Eurasia University, Xi'an, China. ³HeartSpace Education Technology Co., Ltd., Xi'an, China. ⁴New York University, New York, USA

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The transition to university education can be a stressful process as students face numerous challenges, including developing career awareness, exploring prospective educational and professional pathways. Effective academic support is critical during university freshmen's transition; without it, students risk experiencing decreased academic performance, heightened stress, and difficulties integrating socially and academically into university life. However, the importance of academic support for new university students has not received sufficient attention.

This study explores mismatches in academic support for freshmen at a Chinese university. Employing a mixed-method approach with 529 survey responses and 16 longitudinal follow-up interviews. Employing the SERVQUAL model's five dimensions: assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, and empathy, framed within Ecological Systems Theory and Expectation-Confirmation Theory. Findings reveal critical mismatches between institutional academic support and freshmen's expectations, particularly concerning the support content, delivery, and methods. These mismatches highlight structural weaknesses, suggesting a redesigned, student-centred academic support ecosystem.

Full paper

The transition to university education can be a stressful process as students face numerous challenges, including developing career awareness, exploring prospective educational and professional pathways, adapting to new learning environments, and establishing effective study habits (Hartung et al., 2005; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017).

Importantly, previous research on this transition indicates that the first university year is the most critical period for determining whether a student successfully transitions to

higher education (Kantanis, 2000; Krause, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008). Effective support during this transition is essential (Schlossberg, 1981), especially the academic support, influencing new students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall university integration.

The current literature emphasises both formal institutional services and informal interactions, including academic guidance, emotional and psychological support, and life assistance. Typical forms of academic support encompass skill-training workshops, mentorship programs, learning centres, counselling, and peer support groups, which play crucial roles in addressing students' academic needs and enhancing their self-efficacy (Tinto, 2012). Providers of academic support are not limited to teachers and advisors but also include peers, mentors, and specialised support teams (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). High-quality academic support facilitates not only the acquisition of academic knowledge but also improvements in students' learning methods, emotional management, and social adaptability. Boud and Falchikov (2006) highlight that academic support, through resource-rich and personalised services, enables students to gain meaningful feedback and perform self-adjustments. Ultimately, the core value of academic support lies in creating a nurturing learning environment that systematically provides resources and encourages positive interactions, fostering comprehensive student development (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

However, within China's expanding higher education context, the importance of academic support remains insufficiently recognised, and the role and effectiveness of existing support systems are still unclear. Previous studies (Arnold & Zhu, 2011; Zhang & Liu, 2022) pointed out that the current academic support systems struggle to meet the diverse learning needs of students, particularly freshmen undergoing critical transitions. Therefore, the research questions in this study are: What mismatches exist between institutional academic support systems and freshmen's expectations during their transition? How do these mismatches influence students' academic adaptation and learning experience?

This study integrates three complementary theoretical lenses, Ecological Systems Theory (EST), Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT), and the SERVQUAL Model, to holistically analyse academic support mismatches. EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) contextualises academic support within layered environments: microsystem (direct interactions), mesosystem (institutional coordination), and exosystem (broader policies), highlighting systemic structures affecting support provision. ECT (Oliver, 1980) illuminates how mismatches between initial student expectations and actual experiences shape academic satisfaction and adaptation. The SERVQUAL Model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) operationalises these mismatches through tangible dimensions of service quality,

assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, and empathy, allowing precise assessment of service gaps. This integrative approach offers comprehensive insights by linking systemic structures, individual perceptions, and measurable quality indicators, thus providing nuanced strategies to enhance academic support effectiveness.

A mixed-method design was utilised at a Chinese university, involving 529 freshmen from nine majors surveyed about their academic support expectations and perceptions, selected via convenience sampling. Longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted twice (the beginning and the end of first academic year) with 16 participants, who were purposively sampled from survey participants to provide in-depth perspectives. Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis to identify patterns and overall trends. Qualitative interview data underwent thematic analysis, guided by the integrative theoretical framework in this study, to identify and interpret mismatches in academic support experiences.

Quantitative survey results indicated that freshmen recognised the value of academic support, with over 80% expressing strong needs for specific resources, including examination preparation, academic advising, and IT training. Despite this, qualitative thematic analysis highlighted notable mismatches across SERVQUAL dimensions. At the microsystem level, students appreciated timely responses from faculty yet criticised the superficial nature of support, lacking in-depth academic planning and professional guidance. At the mesosystem level, students described departmental resources as abundant but poorly aligned with individual needs, creating confusion and frustration due to ineffective coordination and insufficient empathy. At the ecosystem level, institutional policies and information dissemination remained opaque, limiting students' awareness and access to high-level academic and career development resources. Collectively, these mismatches illustrate structural weaknesses in support systems, significantly affecting freshmen's experience of learning and transition.

This study integrates three theoretical lenses to reveal specific structural gaps in institutional support systems, offering critical evidence to enhance academic adaptation and satisfaction among Chinese university freshmen for their transitional period. However, the study's findings from a single Chinese institution limit generalisability; future research should expand to multiple universities and diverse student groups.