

# *Constructing the Path of Psychological Health Education for International Students in Chinese Universities from the Perspective of Positive Psychology*

**Ruixin Tan**

*School of International Education, Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China*

*diantanrx@163.com*

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**Abstract:** After the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of international students coming to China has shown signs of recovery. Study-related exams have resumed, and students are gradually returning to offline classrooms, enhancing the overall study experience for international students in China. Major institutions have updated their application policies, introduced cooperative education programs, and established interdisciplinary majors, offering international students more pathways for pursuing their education. During this period of revitalization, exploring how to improve the quality and efficiency of education for international students in China has become an important issue. One increasingly prominent concern is the psychological well-being of international students at Chinese universities. Researching the current psychological health status and related mechanisms of international students in China is a crucial aspect of domestic research in the field of international education in China. Currently, research in this area tends to adopt a negative psychology perspective, focusing on issues such as cross-cultural adaptation, depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, and academic life stress among international students in China, while proposing solutions. Positive psychology, on the other hand, views psychology from the standpoint of exploring human beings' highest aspirations and values. It suggests that psychology should shift from studying general or pathological individuals to studying the psychology of "healthy" individuals, uncovering ways to harness creative motivation and unleash human potential. This article aims to construct a path for the psychological well-being education of international students in China from the perspective of positive psychology. It provides different solutions to various issues and aims to assist international students in China in achieving a positive and healthy learning and living experience, with the hope of offering insights for improving the mechanisms for promoting the psychological well-being of international students at Chinese universities.

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of the globalization of higher education and the constant enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength and international influence, the education of international students in Chinese universities has become an integral part of China's higher education. The mental health issues of international students in Chinese universities are increasingly prominent. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health problems of international students have received increasingly attention.

The psychological well-being issues of international students not only affect their academic performance, leading to academic failure, but also pose a serious threat, ranging from self-harm to harming others, thereby becoming destabilizing factors for both universities and society. All of this underscores the urgent need to address the psychological well-being of international students in China and to establish a comprehensive psychological support system for them. It is a pressing priority for higher education institutions [1].

## 2. Research Background

The author retrieved 106 articles on the topic of “psychological health of international students in China” using the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), with this keyword, only 38 articles concern the mental health of international students studying in China and most of them primarily focusing on the psychological issues faced by international students. These issues include maladjustment, academic stress, interpersonal relationship problems, emotional problems, neurosis, personality disorders, and mental disorders, among others. These psychological issues have led to varying degrees of anxiety, depression, and even cases of self-harm, suicide, or harm to others among international students studying in Chinese universities. The rapid increase in such incidents has garnered attention from the higher education community and society as a whole [2].

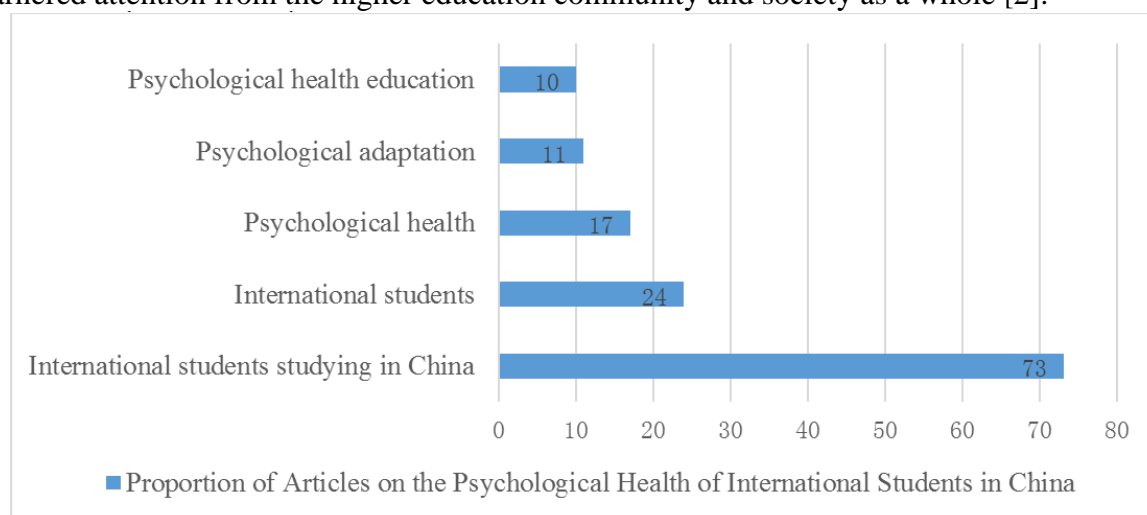


Figure 1. Proportion of Articles on the Psychological Health of International Students in China

However, it's worth noting that most of the perspectives presented in the aforementioned articles stem from negative psychology, primarily viewing international students in China as patients and addressing issues after they have arisen. This, to a certain extent, limits the scope of psychological research. And its focus is no longer on all people but only on those with problems. In fact, universities should improve and develop all students, not just assist those troubled ones. The majority of normal, healthy students also require guidance; like everyone else, they too need

psychological assistance to make their school life more perfect rather than just ordinary is shown in Figure 1.

Secondly, there is an excessive focus on curing problems using a “fast food” approach to address international students’ issues. This method, lacking in introspection and immediate in nature, is difficult to meet the needs of individuals in the campus. It can only address symptoms but not the root causes, and even if the source of the problem is found, it's only a superficial solution that cannot eliminate the generation of problems at their source.

Life is not just a combination of hardship or trauma, and psychology should not solely focus on various human problems and misfortunes. Healing problems and misfortunes cannot be the sole task of psychology. Psychology should also contribute to all students’ happiness and well-being and provide support for normal ones to lead loving lives. The course of social history has proven an inevitable pattern: when a society is in a stable, prosperous, and peaceful era, that society’s culture tends to emphasize human creativity, moral virtues, and high-quality living conditions. In fact, it is through individuals’ positive contributions to each other and to the world that the society is composed. Only when people approach others and the world with positivity can the whole world coexist harmoniously and peacefully, and humanity can attain lasting happiness. Conversely, if humanity responds to the world and its challenges to negativity, society becomes controlled by various problems and loses its potential for existence, and humanity will quickly reach its own demise, let alone achieve happiness.

The research literature on the psychological well-being of international students in China is overly focused on the negative aspects of their personal study lives. Studies on negative psychology far outnumber those on their positive psychological state, which tends to divert public attention toward the negative aspects of human psychology. As Kennon, M. Sheldon and Laura King pointed out in their paper *Why Positive Psychology Is Necessary*: “If one only devotes oneself to studying the mentally disturbed, neurotic, psychologically abnormal, criminals, and mentally vulnerable, then their confidence in humanity is bound to diminish...”[3] In contrast to negative psychology, positive psychology advocates that the virtues within human nature serve as crucial regulators and buffers against psychological disorders. Rather than overly focusing on psychological illnesses, positive psychology promotes the development and cultivation of human virtues to facilitate healthy growth. Positive psychology effectively enhances subjective well-being among humans, supplementing pathological psychology in the present. The significance of this supplement lies in enhancing the overall functionality of psychology.

Negative psychology will continue to play an important role in human progress and societal development in the future. However, without the promotion of love, the transition from one state of existence to another is impossible and unrealistic. It is within the experience of love that the true nature of life becomes more apparent [4]. Pathological psychology will still have a vital role in the education of mental health for international students studying in China in the future.

Positive psychology, on the other hand, enables students to spontaneously heal themselves. This is a pure transformation, a shift from studying the unhappiest events in life to studying the happiest events in life [5]. Applying positive psychology to the education of international students in China is not only crucial but also transformative in several ways. First and foremost, it shifts the focus from merely addressing problems to fostering holistic well-being and personal growth. Embracing a positive psychology perspective recognizes that international students are not just individuals with issues but valuable contributors to the global community. By nurturing their mental and emotional well-being, we empower them to thrive and reach their full potential.

Positive psychology also promotes resilience and adaptability. International students often face a multitude of challenges, from cultural adjustments to academic pressures. Teaching them positive coping mechanisms, resilience-building strategies, and emphasizing their strengths can help them

overcome these challenges with grace and determination.

By focusing on the mental and emotional health of all students, not just those in distress, it will help create a more equitable and nurturing educational ecosystem. This approach recognizes that everyone, regardless of their background, can benefit from guidance and support to lead fulfilling lives. Ultimately, applying positive psychology to international student education in China helps build a more vibrant, resilient, and compassionate global community.

### 3. The Main Principles of Positive Psychology

In today's society, all human activities are no longer solely for survival as they were in the time of ancestors; instead, they are aimed at living a happier life. In an era dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, humanity no longer needs constant warning but requires positivity to strengthen its resilience and confidence when facing life's challenges. This is the most pressing need in contemporary society.

To a certain extent, a society's value orientation plays the role of an inducer of social change for the entire community, much like a therapist does for their patients. The way it introduces these values can influence the kind of changes that occur. While similar results may emerge, they hold different value significance. Positive psychology places its research focus on the positive aspects within individuals. It advocates that psychology should start with the actual, latent, constructive strengths, virtues, and goodness in people. It promotes a positive mindset by interpreting many psychological phenomena, including psychological issues, to awaken individuals' inner positive strengths and qualities. It aims to utilize these positive attributes to help individuals with problems, ordinary individuals, or those with certain talents to maximize their potential and attain a good life.

Furthermore, positive psychology contributes to fostering a sense of positive belonging among members of society. It makes individuals feel like they belong to a nation and a society, enabling each person to assimilate into their environment and society.

Since the beginning of the new century, with Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's Introduction to Positive psychology: An introduction [6] as a milestone, positive psychology has rapidly developed, demonstrating its dominance with sharpness. Its main points include realizing the values of psychology, focusing on the study of the positive personality inherent in every individual, and advocating for positive explanations of problems.

#### 3.1. A Balance with the Psychological System

Modern psychology has evolved into a science dedicated to addressing problems in human life. Guided by this value, system, psychology has completely focused its work on the assessment and correction of psychological issues. Positive psychology refers to this problem-centered psychology as "pathological" psychology, also known as negative psychology. Negative psychology implies a premise or assumption that psychology is the science of "problem-solving" and various psychological issues in individuals are equivalent to physical illnesses in the body. Therefore, under the influence of the concept of negative psychology, the central figures of psychology during this period were focused on repairing problems, fixing damaged habits, motivations, childhoods, and even thoughts, with the expectation of achieving psychological well-being by repairing the damaged parts of the human.

However, negative psychology is not interested in individuals or human society but rather in the problems that exist in individuals or human society. This characteristic of depersonalization in negative psychology violates the fundamental principle that society must be centered around people. Negative psychology views individuals as passive beings who only react to external stimuli. This

dehumanizing psychology has caused human agency to regress into passive biological evolution. Therefore, behind negative psychology, there exists an underlying belief that humans are not autonomous beings capable of making decisions and developing themselves. Biological adaptability is inherent in every living organism, and the development of evolved humans is primarily based on self-directed development through learning, that is, by learning about objects, symbols, and other inventions of humanity to develop their existing strengths. The evolution of human biological factors has prepared humans for active development through learning, and today, the life process has become an uninterrupted process of active learning and development.

This theoretical orientation of negative psychology gradually numbs individuals to the dangers of this societal culture that is always focused on the negative side. In such a cultural atmosphere, individuals become passive and conformist, gradually losing their spirit of innovation and creativity. The meaning of life lies in living, especially in social life. A society worth living in does not primarily focus on problems, and human society, along with its majority, does not have so many and such significant problems that require correction. It may even be that this “medical-style” psychological science is the fundamental cause of the proliferation of social or psychological problems because “medical-style” psychology has forgotten to look for the strengths of society or its members when searching for their problems. This has gradually reduced psychology, which is intended to serve all of humanity into a science that only serves a few. However, the foundation of society consists of ordinary people, who neither have significant problems nor are geniuses; they are happy, and only then can the society become a happy and humane one. Even if humanity entrusts all its psychological problems to others, the society will still be in a state of zero because we have not accumulated everything worthy of admiration. The value system of psychological should be carried out in a more balanced way instead of being led by the negative psychology is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

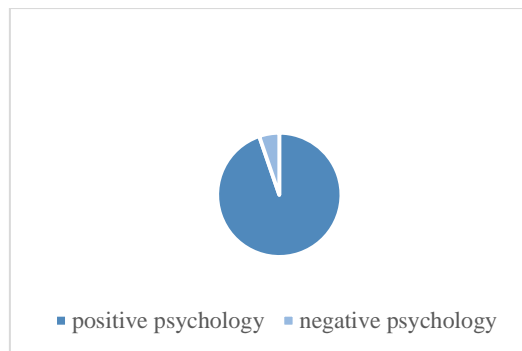


Figure 2. Proportion of Negative and Positive Concerns about the Mental Health of International Students Coming to China



Figure 3. The Balanced Psychological System

### 3.2. Positive Personality

In the context of positive psychology, the concept of “positive personality” advocates focusing on the positive strengths within one’s personality and believes in the interactive coupling of different factors during the personality formation process. At the same time, a positive personality is not merely a static personality trait but also a dynamic psychological process. A positive personality does not only imply blind optimism but also the ability of a person to effectively analyze their surroundings and make rational choices, including the capacity to use their various resources and skills correctly at the right time to achieve their goals or address the challenges they face. Positive psychology advocates for focusing on positive strengths within one’s personality, believing in guiding, stimulating, and reinforcing an individual’s latent abilities and strengths, promoting the development of positive personality traits, and helping individuals alleviate negative psychological factors. This, in turn, benefits their mental and physical well-being and better equips them to cope with changes in the external environment [7].

In fact, even when a person is in a state of despair, depression, or other forms of suffering, they not only concern themselves with how to resolve this suffering. Deep within their hearts, they also care about their dignity, character, life purpose, and the meaning of life. As Russian writer Leo Tolstoy famously wrote in the opening lines of his novel *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” [8], Instead of expending great effort to explore the unique aspects of unhappiness, it might be more beneficial to first consider the commonalities of happiness, which are also positive strengths and qualities possessed by everyone. Positive personality encompasses many elements, among these, it is believed that subjective well-being, self-determination, and optimism are constructive aids to the psychological health education of international students studying in China [9].

The subjective sense of happiness, self-determination, and optimism in a positive personality play an important guiding role in improving the psychological well-being of all international students studying in China. Subjective happiness refers to an individual’s satisfaction with oneself, an overall evaluation of life based on one’s own standards, and a positive affirmation of one’s current life situation [10]. Subjective happiness involves accepting and internally identifying with one’s own life situation. Self-determination primarily refers to an individual’s ability to make free and appropriate choices for their own development based on a thorough understanding of their own needs and the environment they are in, and the determination to stick to those choices as a personality trait. Optimism refers to a positive experience generated by an individual’s environment and behavior. Advocates of positive psychology like Seligman believe that optimism is primarily a personality trait formed after birth. While it may manifest differently in different individuals, most people can develop a learned form of optimism through education, in contrast to the learned helplessness often associated with negative psychology. Optimism can help individuals effectively cope with life challenges and is an important internal resource for regulating both psychological and physical health. It also contributes to strengthening an individual’s self-confidence.

### 3.3. Positive Explanations of Problems

Positive explanations of problems, when viewed through the lens of positive psychology, are a powerful approach to understanding and dealing with life’s challenges. Positive psychology emphasizes the study of human strength, well-being, and positive aspects of life. It encourages individuals to reframe their experiences, including problems and setbacks, in a way that promotes resilience, growth, and overall psychological well-being.

One of the central concepts of positive psychology is the idea that individuals have the capacity



to actively shape their own experiences and perceptions. This concept applies directly to how individuals' approach and explain the problems they encounter. Rather than viewing problems as purely negative or insurmountable, positive psychology suggests that one can choose to interpret oneself in a more constructive and optimistic light. It focuses on developing resilience, which is the ability to bounce back from adversity. Instead of seeing setbacks as failures, individuals can view them as opportunities to strengthen their resilience. This shift in perspective can lead to personal growth and increased emotional strength. It also encourages a growth mindset, where individuals believe that their abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning. When facing problems, people with a growth mindset see them as opportunities to learn and improve, rather than as fixed limitations. Instead of dwelling on the negative aspects of a situation, individuals are encouraged to focus on finding solutions and taking proactive steps to address the issue, which promotes a problem-solving orientation. This proactive approach empowers individuals to take control of their circumstances. Positive explanations of problems emphasize optimism and hope. When people encounter difficulties, maintaining a hopeful outlook can lead to better outcomes. Optimistic individuals believe that challenges are temporary and that they have the capacity to overcome them.

It recognizes the role of positive emotions in resilience and well-being. When individuals view problems positively, they are more likely to experience positive emotions such as hope, gratitude, and resilience, which can buffer against the negative effects of stress and adversity. And posttraumatic growth refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur in individuals who have experienced significant adversity or trauma. By reframing problems as opportunities for growth, people can emerge from difficult experiences with a greater sense of purpose and personal development, which is another important concept of positive psychology. When individuals adopt positive explanations of problems, they are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking support from others, setting achievable goals, and maintaining a sense of control over their lives. These strategies contribute to better mental and emotional well-being.

Positive explanations of problems, as advocated by positive psychology, offer a valuable perspective on how individuals can navigate life's challenges. By reframing problems in a positive light and adopting a mindset of resilience, growth, and hope, individuals can not only overcome difficulties but also thrive in the face of adversity. This approach empowers individuals to actively shape their own experiences and cultivate a greater sense of well-being and fulfillment in their lives.

#### **4. Strategies for Applying Positive Psychology to the Psychological Health Education of International Students Studying in China**

Applying positive psychology to the psychological health education of international students studying in China holds immense significance in fostering a holistic and flourishing educational experience for this diverse group of learners. Firstly, positive psychology offers a proactive approach to mental well-being by emphasizing the cultivation of strength, resilience, and positive emotions. For international students, who often face the challenges of adapting to a new culture, language, and academic system, incorporating positive psychology principles into their psychological health education can empower them to navigate these transitions to greater ease. By promoting self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and a growth mindset, it equips international students with essential tools to cope with stress, build meaningful relationships, and ultimately thrive in their educational journey. Last but not least, applying positive psychology to the psychological health education system for international students studying in China is a complementary and enhancement to existing negative coping strategies. The specific strategies mainly include the following aspects.

#### 4.1. Increasing Positive Emotions

The positive experience, as a relatively microlevel within the field of positive psychology, can serve as the first step in building a protective barrier and enhancing psychological well-being for all human beings. Psychological health education for international students in China can improve their physical, intellectual, and social coordination by expanding their positive experiences and positive emotions. It can have a crucial role in the proactive discovery and nurturing of positive strengths, contributing to the maintenance of the psychological well-being of international students in China, as well as improving their work and study efficiency. Additionally, increasing positive experiences is also a necessary pathway and condition for shaping a positive personality.

In the context of psychological health education for international students in China, universities should prioritize a value-oriented approach to positive emotional experiences. They should integrate various elements of psychological health education with a broad and positive perspective. By treating psychological education as a whole, these elements can be combined to form a scientifically reasonable structural system, optimizing the overall combination and coordinated development for maximum efficiency.

Schools' psychological health education should aim to unleash the inner potential of international students in China and help them develop comprehensive skills. It should focus on the positive aspects of the individual and group self, as well as on subjective feelings such as satisfaction, happiness, and optimism for the future. Furthermore, it should avoid negative emotional experiences, pathological assessments, and interventions. Most universities use SCL testing for psychological health assessment, which evaluates individual stress reactions, emotional states, anxiety, and physiological responses. Positive emotional experiences focus more on assessing individual competency levels. In assessment, efforts should be made to highlight positive qualities such as subjective well-being, life satisfaction, optimism for the future, the positive power of inner potential, harmonious relationships, and positive self-reflection [11].

The goal of the assessments is to guide individuals and groups to focus on and nurture their most positive qualities and potential. Secondly, universities where international students study should encourage teachers to create a positive classroom environment that better guides students and makes them more willing to receive education. The goal of the intervention is not to shield students from failure but to actively pursue success, instilling confidence in students that they can achieve their goals. Teachers should design classroom activities around students' positive qualities, creating an environment that encourages positive behavior among international students in China. This approach ensures that students do not feel suppressed in the classroom. When international students experience joy, they become engaged in the classroom, leading to positive interactions with teachers. This can improve the cognitive and behavioral levels of international students in China and enhance their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social adaptability.

#### 4.2. Shaping a Positive Personality

Shaping a positive personality is essential. Positive personality traits form the foundation of positive psychology research, and positive personality, as a driving force within one's character, not only helps prevent the destructive effects of negative personality traits but also promotes the development of positive adaptability. Therefore, nurturing a positive personality is a prerequisite and guarantee for the development of positive psychological health education for international students in China.

Universities should cultivate positive qualities in international students in China, molding their positive personalities. This effort aims to enable international students to correctly understand



themselves, objectively, evaluate others, face reality, squarely, accept reality, maintain an optimistic attitude, and confront challenges with a positive mindset, particularly in areas such as academic pressure, life stress, language barriers, and cultural adaptation. Shaping a positive personality can be achieved through positive educational activities.

Universities where international students in China study should organize a diverse range of extracurricular activities to promote communication among students and develop positive and healthy psychological qualities. These qualities include sincerity, loyalty, honesty, integrity, righteousness, candor, trustworthiness, self-confidence, self-discipline, emotional regulation, psychological resilience, environmental adaptability, and interpersonal skills.

Encouraging international students in China to participate in academic-oriented student associations with Chinese students or to establish their own academic clubs provides them with opportunities to exchange knowledge and skills related to their academic fields. This allows them to showcase their various talents, gain confidence and self-esteem through acceptance and recognition, or participate in recreational clubs to uplift their emotions and reduce emotional distress while fostering emotional connections with other students.

Furthermore, universities where international students in China enroll can regularly organize positive psychological health education lectures and group counseling activities, gradually integrating the principles of positive psychology into these lectures and activities. Through role-playing, group presentations, and psychological enrichment training methods, students can increase their psychological experiences, enhance positive emotions, and cultivate self-confidence and willpower.

### **4.3. Building a Positive Environment**

Building a positive environment is a significant concept that encompasses positive individual, organizational, and societal environments. A conducive organizational environment is a necessary condition for the psychological health development of college students. International students studying in Chinese universities should enhance their personal qualities, foster a positive and uplifting campus atmosphere, and create a multidimensional campus culture that contributes to an overall positive environment.

Universities should recognize the positive role of campus culture in nurturing students and make efforts to cultivate a favorable psychological environment within the institution. This includes creating a harmonious, relaxed, and healthy collective psychological atmosphere that exposes students to positive influences, thus enhancing their psychological well-being. For example, universities can foster a positive promotional atmosphere. Psychological health education campaigns, as an essential component of education, should be more aligned with the concept of positive psychology to create a positive and harmonious atmosphere for psychological health education among international students in China, promoting the development of their positive nature and encouraging more students to participate in positive psychological health education.

Various environments and organizations, such as social, campus, departments, and dormitories, can influence each international student. Universities where international students study in China can utilize campus radio stations, bilingual displays for promoting knowledge related to positive psychology, establish positive psychology health education columns in campus newspapers, and create webpages dedicated to positive psychology health education on campus websites. These initiatives help create a conducive promotional atmosphere for the psychological health development of college students, allowing international students to understand the positive strengths and virtues at the human level. This can play a significant role in preventing, regulating, and mitigating psychological disorders and further stimulate the subjective initiative and potential of

international students in China, promoting their holistic and harmonious development of body and mind.

## 5. Conclusion

By adopting a positive psychology approach, the need to shift the focus from merely addressing problems to nurturing the positive aspects of mental health can be recognized. This shift is not only timely but also crucial in the context of international higher education.

In the context of international education, where students from diverse cultural backgrounds come together, the principles of positive psychology can play a unifying role. It encourages individuals to focus on their common strengths and positive qualities, transcending cultural differences. This approach not only fosters a sense of belonging and unity among international students but also enriches the overall educational experience.

By providing a compelling argument for the adoption of positive psychology, and shifting the focus from problem to strength, from negativity to positivity, universities can create an environment that empowers international students to thrive academically, emotionally, and personally. This approach aligns with the contemporary emphasis on holistic education and the pursuit of happiness, making it not only relevant but also essential in the context of international higher education. As universities continue to welcome students from diverse backgrounds, the principles of positive psychology offer a promising pathway to ensure the well-being and success of all students.

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