EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF EMERGING EDUCATION RESEARCH

Cultivating Global Competence: Examining Chinese University Students' Agentic Approaches Amidst Competing Priorities

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V0LUME01 ISSUE01 (2024)
Published Date: 07 December 2024 // Page no.: - 18-38

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the fascinating ways Chinese university students navigate their journey toward developing global competence (GC) within their demanding academic and personal lives. We'll explore this, especially when GC isn't their top priority. Drawing on powerful ideas about human agency [1, 2, 3, 5], how society shapes us [15], and the many layers of our environment [7], this study uncovers the rich tapestry of factors influencing students' active engagement with GC. While China's higher education system is deeply committed to internationalization [32, 33, 47, 48], students often find themselves caught between intense domestic pressures, like achieving top grades and securing good jobs, which can push GC down their list of concerns. Through a deep dive into qualitative data, this research reveals the clever strategies and real challenges students face as they try to build GC. It highlights the constant dance between their personal dreams, what their universities offer, and the broader societal landscape. Understanding these individual approaches is incredibly important for creating better, more student-focused initiatives that truly help young people thrive in our increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Global competence, student agency, Chinese universities, internationalization of higher education, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where everything is connected, where changes ripple across continents in an instant. That's our reality today. In this incredibly interconnected and rapidly transforming global landscape, the idea of **global competence (GC)** has moved beyond being just a nice-to-have; it's become an absolute must for everyone, no matter where they are or what they do [19, 39, 49]. Think about the big challenges we face – climate change, global pandemics, intertwined economies, and a beautiful, complex mix of cultures. To navigate this intricate web, we need people who can understand different perspectives, work across cultural divides, and take meaningful action for the good of all. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines GC beautifully: it's about being able to look closely at local, global, and intercultural issues, truly grasp and appreciate diverse viewpoints, interact openly and effectively with people from different backgrounds, and then actually do something to make our collective well-being and sustainable future a reality [42, 49]. This rich definition shows us just how many layers there are to GC, making it a cornerstone goal for universities around the world [10, 11, 20, 21, 29, 37].

Now, let's turn our gaze to China. With its booming economy and growing presence on the global stage, China also boasts the largest higher education system in the world. Picture this: a staggering 47.63 million students enrolled across 3074 institutions in 2023 [40, 54]. Recognizing its vital role in shaping the next generation of global leaders and innovators, the Chinese government has, since the 1970s, made the **internationalization of its higher education (IHE)** sector a strategic priority [32, 33, 39, 47, 48]. This national push, embodied in initiatives like the prestigious "Double First-Class" project [38], aims to nurture graduates who are not only academically brilliant but also globally competitive – ready to confidently navigate the international arena and contribute to China's ongoing development [31, 32]. Official documents, like the 2020 "Opinions to accelerate and expand the opening up of education to the outside world in the new era" [39] and Premier Qiang Li's 2024 reaffirmation of promoting international talent exchange [29], consistently highlight this unwavering commitment.

However, here's where it gets interesting. Despite these ambitious national and institutional goals, developing global competence isn't always seen as the absolute top priority by Chinese university students themselves. Imagine being a

student in China's incredibly competitive academic world. Your main focus is often on getting stellar grades, acing standardized tests, and securing that coveted job after graduation [19, 24, 28, 45]. This intense drive, often described as a "scores first" mentality [24], can, perhaps unintentionally, push the perceived value and immediate usefulness of GC development into the background, making it a secondary or even tertiary concern. This creates a noticeable gap between the big-picture goals of educational policy and the everyday realities and immediate priorities of individual students. Such a divergence begs crucial questions: How do students, as active individuals within this complex system, actually engage with and navigate the opportunities and challenges of cultivating GC? What choices do they make when faced with these competing demands?

At the heart of understanding these choices lies the concept of **human agency**. This is our fundamental ability to actively shape our own lives within the boundaries and possibilities of existing social structures and contexts [1, 2, 3, 5, 13, 14]. Agency isn't just a fixed trait or a single action; it's a dynamic, multi-layered process deeply influenced by everything around us – from our interactions with friends and mentors to the resources available to us [3, 7, 30]. In education, **student agency** refers to a learner's capacity to take ownership of their learning journey, make informed decisions, and influence their educational experiences [25, 27, 51]. While some research has explored different aspects of student agency in international higher education [22, 51, 52], there's still a significant gap. We don't fully understand how domestic Chinese university students, in particular, exercise their agency in developing GC, especially when they're up against formidable academic and career pressures. What's more, much of the existing work tends to focus on what *enables* agency or how students *overcome* challenges [32, 53], rather than offering a balanced view that also explores the nature of the obstacles and constraints they face [47].

This article sets out to fill this crucial research gap. We will meticulously explore how Chinese university students enact their agency in developing global competence, especially when it's not their primary focus. Using a rigorous **qualitative research methodology**, this study aims to uncover the diverse ways students actively engage, pinpoint the intricate personal and structural factors that either empower or limit their agency, and map out the various strategies they employ to pursue GC amidst a landscape of competing demands. By shining a light on these complex dynamics, this research seeks to contribute a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of GC development within the unique Chinese context. Ultimately, the insights we gain are intended to help educators and policymakers design and implement more effective, student-centered initiatives that truly foster active engagement and meaningful global learning experiences for all in our ever-more interconnected world.

2. Literature Review

The undeniable rise of global competence as a vital skill in the 21st century makes it essential to thoroughly review how it's understood, how it develops, and the crucial role of student agency in that process. This section will dive into existing research to build a strong foundation for our current study, blending theoretical insights with empirical evidence.

2.1. Defining and Developing University Students' Global Competence

While the idea of global competence feels very current, its roots actually go back several decades. It really started to take shape in 1988 with a groundbreaking publication from the USA's Council on International Educational Exchange, titled "Educating for Global Competence" [11]. This foundational document made a powerful argument: that nurturing citizens with global awareness and competence was absolutely essential for navigating the unpredictable and culturally diverse world that was emerging. The goal was to build a more prosperous America and, by extension, a more interconnected world. Building on this, Lambert (1993) emphasized a crucial shift in students' perspectives. He argued they needed to move away from "ethnocentrism"—the tendency to see the world only through their own cultural lens—towards "ethnorelativism," which means understanding their own culture as just one of many diverse frameworks [26]. This conceptual shift was a fundamental step towards fostering genuine global understanding.

In the decades that followed, global competence became a hot topic across education and academia. Scholars began to describe it using an "inward-outward dynamic" [21, 48]. This idea suggests that a globally competent individual evolves from internal qualities, like their knowledge and mindset, to outward skills and actions that they demonstrate in social interactions. It's a dynamic process, highlighting that GC isn't just about memorizing facts; it's about internalizing values and translating them into real-world behaviors. The literature consistently identifies several key components of global competence:

- **Knowledge:** This isn't just rote memorization. It's about having a solid understanding of major global issues (think climate change, poverty, human rights) and diverse cultures, including their histories, values, and how they operate today [42, 49, 53]. It's about being able to critically analyze global phenomena, not just recall information. For instance, understanding the historical context of a particular region can help explain current geopolitical tensions or cultural nuances. This deep knowledge allows individuals to connect seemingly disparate events and understand their

broader implications.

- **Skills:** These are the practical abilities you need to effectively engage in global settings. This includes strong communication skills, especially **intercultural communication**—the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. It also involves critical thinking, which means being able to analyze information objectively and form reasoned judgments, even when faced with complex, multi-faceted global problems. Problem-solving skills are vital for addressing shared global challenges, and the capacity for **collaboration across differences** is paramount in a world that demands collective action. Finally, **adaptability** is key—the flexibility to adjust to new situations, unexpected challenges, and diverse ways of doing things [45, 49, 53]. And, of course, language proficiency, particularly in English as a global lingua franca, is often highlighted as a crucial skill that unlocks many of these other abilities [21]. Imagine trying to collaborate on a global project without a common language or the ability to understand different communication styles.
- **Attitudes/Dispositions:** These are the internal mindsets that make global engagement possible and positive. They include **openness to diverse perspectives**, meaning a genuine willingness to consider viewpoints different from your own, even if they challenge your beliefs. **Respect for cultural diversity** is fundamental, acknowledging the inherent worth and validity of all cultures. **Empathy** allows you to understand and share the feelings of others, bridging cultural gaps. **Curiosity** drives you to learn more about the world and its people, while a **willingness to challenge one's own assumptions** is crucial for growth and avoiding biases [49]. These attitudes form the bedrock upon which knowledge and skills can truly flourish.
- **Behaviors/Actions:** This is where understanding and skills translate into tangible impact. It's the capacity to take informed, responsible, and ethical action on global issues for the collective good and sustainable development [49]. This moves beyond simply knowing or being able to do something; it's about actively participating in addressing global challenges. This could range from advocating for human rights, participating in environmental initiatives, or engaging in fair trade practices. It's about becoming a responsible global citizen.

While global competence shares common ground with **intercultural competence**—especially in areas like cultural awareness, adaptability, and openness to other cultures [16]—it extends beyond these. Global competence encompasses a broader understanding of complex global issues, whether they are cultural, social, political, or economic, and it demands that actions and decisions meticulously consider their global implications [16, 42]. So, while intercultural competence is a vital piece of the puzzle, global competence offers a more comprehensive framework for truly engaging with our interconnected world.

Historically, the primary way universities have tried to cultivate students' global competence has been through the **internationalization of higher education (IHE)**. Research consistently shows that students who have cross-border international experiences—like studying abroad, internships in other countries, or exchange programs—are significantly better equipped to develop their intercultural understanding, communication skills, and, as a result, their overall global competence [50, 53]. These immersive experiences offer unparalleled opportunities for direct engagement with diverse cultures and perspectives, fostering a deeper, more personal understanding than classroom learning alone. However, it's also a widely acknowledged truth that these cross-border experiences aren't accessible to everyone. Prohibitive costs, strict academic requirements, and complex logistics often create significant barriers [13].

In response to these accessibility challenges, recent years have seen a remarkable increase in remote learning and virtual interactions. This trend was particularly accelerated by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic [13, 27]. This shift has, in turn, sparked the emergence and growing recognition of "**internationalization at home (IaH)**" as a viable and increasingly vital approach to fostering GC [13, 18, 27, 32]. IaH is about purposefully integrating diverse international and intercultural dimensions into the formal curriculum and informal campus life for *all* students, right within their domestic environment. This allows students to develop global awareness and skills without needing to physically travel [13, 18]. In China, specifically, IaH is increasingly seen as an effective and equitable way to ensure that a wider range of students can benefit from cross-cultural exposure and internationalized education [27]. The core philosophy behind this is "thinking globally, learning locally," a concept that's gaining considerable traction in higher education. It reflects a concerted effort to democratize access to global learning opportunities and aligns perfectly with the growing emphasis on student agency and active participation in their own educational journeys.

2.2. Student Agency in Developing Global Competence

The concept of **agency**, broadly speaking, refers to an individual's ability to take planned, intentional actions, and to effectively tackle challenges posed by their situation and by broader societal structures [22, 47]. It's not a simple trait or a single act; instead, it's a complex, multi-dimensional idea that's constantly shaped by our personal characteristics, our past experiences, and the intricate environment around us [32]. To truly understand student agency in the context of developing global competence, we

need to draw on different theoretical perspectives that shed light on its individual, social, and contextual dimensions.

Individualist Perspectives on Agency:

When we look at agency from an individual perspective, it's closely tied to a person's ability to regulate themselves, their intentional actions, their reflective thinking, and their underlying motivations [23]. Two key theories offer profound insights here:

- **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory:** Albert Bandura's groundbreaking work on social cognitive theory [1, 2] sees human agency as our fundamental capacity to influence our own functioning and the events around us. This perspective highlights four core characteristics of agency:
  - **Intentionality:** This is about actively committing to a course of action, which involves thinking ahead and planning. It's not just doing something, but *deciding* to do it with a purpose.
  - **Forethought:** This means anticipating the likely outcomes of our actions, setting goals, and planning the steps needed to achieve them. It's about visualizing the future and preparing for it.
  - **Self-reactiveness:** This is our ability to monitor, regulate, and guide our own actions as we pursue our goals. It includes checking our progress, evaluating how we're doing, and making adjustments as needed. Think of it as our internal GPS, constantly recalibrating.
  - Self-reflectiveness: This is the capacity to think about our own functioning, including how accurate our thoughts are and how effective our actions are. It's about self-appraisal and metacognition – thinking about our thinking. This allows us to learn from our experiences and improve.

    A crucial idea within Bandura's framework that heavily influences agency is perceived self-efficacy [1, 2, 41, 46]. This is simply an individual's belief in their own capabilities to successfully carry out the actions needed to manage future situations. When someone has high perceived self-efficacy, they are more motivated, put in more effort, and persist longer, even when facing tough challenges [1, 2]. On the flip side, low self-efficacy can lead to avoiding situations and disengaging. For example, a student with high self-efficacy about their ability to communicate across cultures or adapt to new environments is much more likely to actively seek out and stick with global learning opportunities [20, 26]. They believe they can do it, so they try.
- **Self-Determination Theory (SDT):** Developed by Ryan and Deci [44], SDT emphasizes the vital roles of motivation and free will in driving human behavior. SDT views individuals as naturally autonomous beings, driven by innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Agency, according to SDT, truly flourishes when the social environment successfully meets these basic psychological needs, which then fosters motivation that comes from within (internalized, self-determined motivation).
  - **Autonomy:** This is the feeling of having choice and control over your own actions, rather than feeling pressured or forced.
  - **Competence:** This is the feeling of being effective and mastering your endeavors, of being good at what you do.
  - Relatedness: This is the feeling of connection and belonging with others, of being cared for and caring about others.

    When students feel autonomous in their pursuit of GC, competent in their global skills, and connected to a supportive learning community, their engagement is much more likely to be genuine and long-lasting. It comes from a place of personal interest and fulfillment, rather than just being driven by external rewards or pressures.

Sociological Perspectives on Agency:

While individual factors are undeniably important, sociological perspectives highlight how broader social structures profoundly influence, and are influenced by, individual agency. It's a two-way street.

- **Giddens's Structuration Theory:** Anthony Giddens's [15] structuration theory offers a powerful way to understand the dynamic, back-and-forth relationship between agency and structure. Giddens argues that social structures—which include rules (like norms, laws, and conventions) and resources (like money, knowledge, and power)—are both the *means* by which we act and the *result* of our actions. In other words, through our daily activities, we simultaneously reproduce (keep going) and transform (change) these structures. In an educational context, university policies (e.g., curriculum requirements, funding for international programs), societal expectations (e.g., the emphasis on specific career paths), and cultural norms (e.g., valuing academic scores above all else) all form structures. These structures can either enable (make possible) or constrain (limit) students' active pursuit of GC. Conversely, students' collective or individual choices and actions—like forming informal study groups to discuss global issues, advocating for more internationalized curricula, or choosing to prioritize certain learning experiences—can, over time, subtly influence and potentially reshape these institutional and societal structures. For example, if enough students

actively seek out and demonstrate the value of virtual exchange programs, the university might be prompted to invest more in such initiatives, thereby changing the structure.

- **Bourdieu's Habitus:** Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" [6] adds another rich layer to understanding agency. Bourdieu argues that agency isn't simply a matter of free will; it's deeply embedded in "habitual practice"—a flow of action that is neither strictly determined by outside forces nor purely an expression of individual autonomy. Habitus refers to a system of dispositions (our ingrained ways of thinking, feeling, and acting) that we acquire through our experiences within specific social environments. These dispositions shape how we perceive the world, what we think, and how we act, often without us even realizing it. So, a student's active engagement with GC is influenced by their habitus, which is shaped by their family background, their schooling experiences, and the broader cultural environment they grew up in. For instance, a student from a family that traveled extensively internationally might have a habitus that naturally encourages them to proactively seek out global opportunities, almost instinctively.

Ecological and Temporal Perspectives on Agency:

To truly grasp the complexity of agency, we also need to view it through ecological and temporal lenses.

- **Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model:** Urie Bronfenbrenner's [7] bioecological model offers a holistic framework for understanding human development as a product of dynamic, reciprocal interactions between an individual and their environment across multiple nested systems. Think of it like a set of Russian dolls, each system fitting inside the next:
  - **Microsystem:** This is the immediate environment where the individual directly participates. For a student, this includes their family, their close friends, their university classroom, and student organizations. Interactions within this system directly influence a student's daily experiences and their immediate opportunities for GC development. For example, a supportive family might encourage global discussions at home.
  - **Mesosystem:** This refers to the interconnections and interactions *between* two or more microsystems. For instance, the relationship between a student's family and their university, or how their academic department collaborates with the international office. A strong mesosystem, where different parts of a student's life are aligned and supportive, can significantly boost their GC development.
  - **Exosystem:** These are external settings that indirectly affect the individual, even though the individual doesn't directly participate in them. Examples include university administration decisions about international partnerships, national funding policies for student mobility, or local community resources for cultural events. These external factors can create opportunities or impose constraints on GC development, even from a distance.
  - Macrosystem: This is the broadest level, encompassing the overarching cultural values, societal norms, laws, and dominant ideologies of the society. In China, this includes the national emphasis on academic achievement, or the global discourse on internationalization. The macrosystem shapes the nature of all the other systems and influences the overall context for GC development. For example, a national policy promoting global engagement can create a supportive macrosystem.

    This multi-layered approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how various contextual factors, from family expectations to national education policies, both shape and are shaped by students' agency in developing GC. The "ecological and person-in-context conceptualization" of cosmopolitan agency [27] further aligns with this dynamic, multi-layered understanding.
- **Emirbayer and Mische's Temporal Dimension:** Emirbayer and Mische [14] introduce a crucial time-based dimension to agency. They theorize that agency is shaped iteratively (through repetition and refinement) by past experiences, with distinct elements for understanding the present and envisioning the future:
  - **Practical-Evaluative Element:** This involves understanding and making judgments based on current circumstances and past experiences. Students evaluate their present situation and available resources based on what they've learned before and what they perceive as reality. It's about making sense of "now" through the lens of "then."
  - Projective Element: This involves looking forward, envisioning future possibilities, setting goals, and planning the actions needed to achieve them. This forward-looking aspect is incredibly important for sustained engagement in GC development. It's about dreaming big and then figuring out the steps to get there.

    Consistent with these views, Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue that agency isn't something a person inherently "has," like a possession. Instead, it's something a person "does" or "achieves" through their active engagement with a particular context [3]. This relational and situated perspective emphasizes that agency is constantly unfolding and

being realized through ongoing interactions with the environment. It's a verb, not a noun.

Agency in International Education Research:

Existing research has already acknowledged that students' engagement in global learning is influenced by a range of personal and contextual factors. Several studies have specifically looked at agency in international students, identifying key functions like self-reflection to understand personal desires, behavioral self-regulation, and how they resist or adapt to new environments [22]. Tran and Vu (2018) explored how agency shapes and is shaped by international students' lived experiences as they move across countries, proposing different forms of "agency in mobility," including agency for becoming and needs-responsive agency [51]. Luong et al. (2023) showed that developing intercultural adaptability depends on both the student's own agency and the support they receive from their institution [32].

However, much of this valuable scholarship has mostly focused on international students and their cultural competence [32, 51, 53]. There's a noticeable lack of empirical research specifically exploring the role of *domestic* students' agency in developing global competence, especially in non-Western contexts like China. Furthermore, most studies on student agency tend to highlight what *enables* agency or how students *overcome* challenges [32, 53], often without deeply examining the nature of those challenges or the various individual and structural influences that might actually *limit* or *constrain* students' active choices [47]. With an ecological perspective, this study focuses on domestic Chinese university students, aiming to provide a more balanced and inclusive account of their agency. We want to shed light not only on how and when agency is sparked but also on how it might be held back or restricted by the complex interplay of personal and contextual factors. This leads us to our core research questions:

1. What personal and structural factors influence how Chinese university students act to develop global competence?
2. How do Chinese university students actually put their agency into practice when developing global competence?

METHODOLOGY

This section lays out the detailed plan for how we conducted this study. We'll cover everything from our research design and how we chose our participants, to the methods we used for collecting data and how we analyzed it. Our goal here is to be completely transparent and rigorous, so that our findings are trustworthy and our process could be understood and, if desired, replicated by others.

3.1. Research Design

For this study, we chose a **qualitative research design**, specifically an **interpretivist approach**. This means we weren't just looking for numbers or statistics; we wanted to deeply explore the lived experiences, personal perceptions, and subjective understandings of Chinese university students as they navigate developing global competence [10, 43]. We opted for a qualitative approach over quantitative methods because we wanted to capture the richness, depth, and subtle nuances of individual stories. We knew that many intricate, often hidden, factors influence how students act, and these might easily be missed by broader surveys [5]. The interpretivist way of thinking perfectly matched our goal: to understand how participants make sense of their world within their specific social and cultural contexts. Our main way of gathering information was through **one-to-one semi-structured interviews**. This format gave us a flexible yet structured framework, allowing us to explore pre-determined themes while also being open to new insights that emerged and following up on each participant's unique perspectives [10, 43].

3.2. Research Sites and Participants

Our study took place in two public universities located in central China. To protect their privacy and ensure anonymity, we'll refer to them as University A and University B. We carefully selected these universities based on specific criteria to ensure they were relevant to our study and accessible to our research team:

1. **Comprehensive Academic Disciplines:** Both universities offer a wide range of academic fields, from humanities and social sciences to natural sciences and engineering. This diversity was important because it allowed us to gather insights from students with varied academic backgrounds and experiences.
2. **Multi-level Education:** Both institutions provide education from undergraduate to doctoral levels. This meant we could include students at different stages of their higher education journey, giving us a broader picture of GC development over time.
3. **Presence of International Students:** Both universities enroll international students (though they make up only about 1% of the total student population). This provided a potential, albeit limited, context for local students to interact with people from different cultures.
4. **Global Competence/Related Programs:** We identified both universities as having programs or initiatives related to global competence or internationalization. This confirmed they had an institutional context relevant to our study.
5. **Accessibility for Research Team:** Our research team had established professional contacts and was geographically close to both universities, which made communication and fieldwork much more efficient.

It's worth noting that both University A and University B are

part of China's prestigious "Double First-Class" project list [38]. This is a national initiative aimed at elevating a select number of universities and specific disciplines to world-class status. University A was founded in the 1920s, and University B in the 1940s. Both are large institutions, each with over 40,000 students across all levels of study.

We used a **purposive sampling strategy** to ensure we got a diverse group of participants [35]. This meant we intentionally chose students who could offer rich and varied perspectives across important demographic factors. Our selection criteria for individual students were:

1. They had to be full-time students at either University A or University B.
2. As a group, they needed to represent a range of disciplines (social sciences, humanities and arts, natural sciences, engineering and technology) and education levels (undergraduate and postgraduate).
3. Each student had to express genuine interest in our research topic and be willing to openly share their perceptions and experiences.

We found our participants through a few different channels: direct outreach using our existing contacts, advertisements on university social media, and **snowball sampling**, where early participants helped us connect with other potential candidates who fit our criteria. Our open invitation clearly explained the research topic, its purpose, and what participating would involve. Students who were interested responded voluntarily and confirmed their willingness to take part.

Before we started the interviews, we made sure to follow a thorough **informed consent process** [10, 43]. We fully explained the research aims, procedures, and interview format to each potential participant. This included clearly stating their right to skip any question, to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences, and assuring them that their identity and responses would remain anonymous and confidential. In total, **52 students** participated in our study: 29 from University A and 23 from University B. Table 1 below provides a summary of our participant profiles, showing the diversity in gender, education level, and academic discipline. It's particularly interesting that only three of our participants had any prior short-term international experience, while the vast majority did not. This gave us a crucial perspective on how domestic students, without extensive international exposure, navigate their journey toward global competence.

Table 1: Participant profiles

	University A	**University B**	**Total**
Gender			
Male	4	15	19
Female	25	8	33
Education level			
Undergraduate	19	12	31
Postgraduate	10	11	21
Disciplinary area			
Social Sciences	13	2	15
Humanities and Arts	7	5	12
Natural Sciences	1	6	7
Engineering & Technology	8	10	18

3.3. Data Collection

Our main way of gathering information was through **one-to-one semi-structured interviews** with each student. We chose this interview style because it's fantastic for getting rich, detailed stories about what participants think, feel,

value, and perceive. It allowed us to truly uncover their "lived world" [10] – the subjective meanings they attach to their experiences. To make sure everyone felt comfortable and open to sharing, we offered them the choice of doing the interviews online (using video calls) or in person, at their preferred spot on campus. Each interview typically lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, giving us plenty of time to explore themes in depth.

We meticulously put together an **interview protocol** based on our study's theoretical framework and research questions. The protocol started with simple questions to gather basic demographic information. Then, we moved into a series of open-ended questions designed to explore key areas of interest. These included:

- **Perceptions of Global Competence:** We wanted to know what GC *meant* to them. How important did they genuinely believe it was for their future, both personally and professionally? We encouraged them to define it in their own words, not just repeat textbook definitions.
- **Personal and Structural Factors:** We asked about the individual characteristics (like their past experiences, language skills, or what truly motivated them) and the external factors (such as university programs, family influence, or their peer groups) that they felt influenced their journey toward GC. We wanted to understand what helped them and what held them back.
- **Activities and Engagement:** We explored what university-led activities they participated in, if any, and, crucially, what **self-initiated activities** they undertook to develop GC. We also asked about any challenges they encountered during these engagements. This helped us see where formal structures ended and individual initiative began.
- **Priorities and Trade-offs:** This was a vital area. We asked how they managed to balance developing GC with other, often more pressing, academic and career priorities. We wanted to understand the real-world decisions they made about their time and energy.

Throughout the interviews, our researchers practiced **active listening** and used **probing questions** (like "Can you tell me more about that?", "What exactly do you mean by that?", or "Could you give me a specific example?") to encourage participants to elaborate, clarify their statements, and delve deeper into their experiences. This wasn't just a Q&A session; it was a conversation designed to uncover rich narratives. With the explicit permission of every participant, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded. This was essential for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of our data. Afterward, these audio recordings were painstakingly transcribed word-for-word by the researchers. To uphold the crucial principles of **confidentiality and anonymity**, all personally identifying information – such as names, specific departments, or any unique identifiers – was carefully anonymized or removed during the transcription and data management process [10].

In addition to the interviews, we also used **document analysis** as a secondary way to collect data. We gathered publicly available documents from both universities, including official policies, strategic plans related to the internationalization of higher education (IHE), and news bulletins about global competence initiatives. This secondary data served several important purposes:

- **Contextual Background:** It gave us essential background information about the institutional settings and the broader policy environment in which our students were operating. It helped us understand the "official" narrative of internationalization.
- **Research Question Generation:** It helped us inform and refine some of our research questions by highlighting what the institutions themselves prioritized and aimed for.
- **Supplementary Data:** It offered extra data that helped us understand the universities' patterns of engagement in programs and activities related to GC. This allowed us to **triangulate** our findings – comparing and cross-referencing what students told us with what the official documents stated [35]. For example, if a university document heavily emphasized a particular international exchange program, our interviews could then explore how aware students were of that program and how accessible they found it. This cross-referencing strengthened the validity of our interpretations.

3.4. Data Analysis

Once all our interview transcripts and collected documents were ready, we imported them into NVivo, a specialized software for qualitative data analysis. This helped us conduct a systematic and rigorous **inductive thematic analysis** [5]. Our data analysis process closely followed the six-phase framework for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) [4]. This framework is widely respected for its structured yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (or "themes") within qualitative data. Here are the iterative steps we took:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Our first step was to completely immerse ourselves in the data. This meant reading and re-reading all the interview transcripts and reviewing the documents multiple times. Our goal was to gain a deep, comprehensive understanding of the content, the subtle nuances, and the overall tone of what participants had shared. During this phase, we made initial observations and noted down any potential areas of interest that seemed to stand out. It was about getting a feel for the data before we started dissecting it.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** In this phase, two researchers worked independently to code each transcript line-by-line. We assigned a **descriptive code** to every sentence or segment of text that seemed

relevant to our research questions. This process involved both **inductive coding** (where codes emerged directly from the data, without us imposing pre-set ideas) and **deductive coding** (where codes were informed by our theoretical framework and existing literature). For example, if a student talked about wanting to improve their English specifically for reading academic papers, we might code that as "instrumental language learning." If another student expressed sheer joy in conversations with international peers, that might be coded as "intrinsic intercultural interest." This was an iterative process; we revisited transcripts multiple times to refine our codes and ensure we hadn't missed any important details. To ensure **inter-rater reliability**, a crucial aspect of qualitative rigor, we compared our independent coding. Cohen's Kappa was estimated at 0.82 [12], which indicates a high level of consistency and agreement between our two coders. This gave us confidence in the robustness of our initial coding.

3. **Searching for Themes:** After completing our independent coding, the two researchers came together to compare and discuss all their coding decisions. Any disagreements or discrepancies were openly discussed and resolved through consensus. This collaborative process was vital for minimizing individual selective perception and interpretive bias [43]. Once we agreed on the codes, we began grouping similar or related codes into initial thematic categories. This involved looking for overarching patterns, connections, and recurring ideas across all the coded data segments. For instance, if we had codes like "cost of study abroad," "limited scholarships," and "family financial concerns," we might group them under a preliminary theme like "financial barriers to international experience." It was like piecing together a puzzle, seeing how smaller ideas formed bigger pictures.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** This phase involved a critical evaluation of our provisional themes. We carefully assessed whether each theme was coherent (meaning it made logical sense and told a clear story), distinct (meaning it didn't overlap too much with other themes), and accurately reflected the entire dataset. We did this by mapping the themes back to the raw data, making sure that there was enough compelling evidence to support each theme. We also looked for any data that didn't seem to fit into our established themes, which sometimes led us to refine existing themes or even create new ones. The goal was to ensure that our themes provided a compelling, accurate, and comprehensive representation of what the data was truly telling us.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Once we were confident in our final themes, we clearly defined each one. This involved specifying exactly what aspect of the data each theme captured and outlining its boundaries. We then assigned descriptive and evocative names to each theme, aiming for titles that encapsulated its essence and made it easy to communicate our findings clearly. We also defined sub-themes to provide even greater detail and granularity within the broader themes.
6. **Producing the Report:** The final step was to write up our findings in a detailed analysis section. For each theme and sub-theme, we presented our interpretations, always backing them up with vivid and illustrative direct quotes from the participants' interviews. These quotes served as powerful empirical evidence, grounding our analytical interpretations firmly in the participants' own words. Throughout this section, we consistently connected our findings back to our original research questions and our theoretical framework, demonstrating how the data contributed to a deeper and richer understanding of student agency in GC development.

To further enhance the **trustworthiness and reliability** of our findings, we implemented several additional measures:

- **Researcher Reflexivity:** Our lead researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the entire research process. In this journal, they documented their own biases, assumptions, and how their interpretations evolved over time. Regular team discussions also served as a vital space for critical self-reflection and for challenging each other's perspectives, ensuring we remained as objective as possible.
- **Peer Debriefing:** We regularly engaged in peer debriefing sessions with an external qualitative researcher who was not directly involved in our data collection or initial analysis. This provided an independent, fresh perspective and helped us challenge our interpretations and ensure our methodology was rigorous. It was like having a critical friend review our work.
- **Triangulation:** We used data **triangulation** by comparing and cross-referencing insights we gained from our primary interview data with the information we gathered from our secondary document analysis. This process helped us confirm our findings and gave us a more comprehensive understanding of the context [10]. For example, if students mentioned a lack of international opportunities, we could check university documents to see if this was reflected in official policies or offerings.
- **Member Checks:** After we had developed our preliminary findings, we invited a subset of our participants to review them, including the codes, themes, and interpretations derived from their own interviews. This "**member checking**" process allowed participants to validate the accuracy of our

interpretations and gave them an opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their original statements. This step significantly enhanced the credibility of our findings [10], as it ensured that our interpretations resonated with the people whose experiences we were studying. Any discrepancies raised during member checks were carefully addressed through dialogue and refinement of our analysis.

By meticulously following these methodological steps, our study aimed to produce robust, credible, and deeply insightful findings about how Chinese university students exercise their agency in developing global competence.

4. Findings

Our careful thematic analysis of the qualitative data has brought to light the intricate dance between individual factors and the broader structural contexts that shape how Chinese university students actively engage in developing global competence. The findings are organized into three main themes: (1) Individual Orientations, which explores personal influences; (2) Structural Factors, which looks at how institutions and families play a role; and (3) Exercising Agency, which then breaks down into four distinct ways students actually put their agency into practice.

4.1. Individual Orientations

This section dives into the personal influences that either significantly help or hinder students' journey toward global competence. We consistently found three key individual factors across all our participant stories: their past international experiences, their belief in their own abilities (self-efficacy), and what truly motivates them. These factors often work together in dynamic ways, shaping how ready and able a student is to actively engage in global learning.

4.1.1. Trajectories of International Experience

Developing global competence isn't a quick fix; it's a long, evolving journey, deeply shaped by students' changing identities, their future dreams, and all the experiences they accumulate over time [48]. When we asked participants to look back, they often highlighted that meaningful past international or intercultural exposure played a crucial role in shaping their current views and motivations. Experiences like studying abroad, taking part in international exchange programs, or even just engaging in globally focused extracurricular activities were consistently mentioned as fostering "broader worldviews, greater open-mindedness" (Participant 15) and significantly boosting their communication skills (Participants 24 & 41). These formative experiences often acted as powerful sparks, motivating students to continue cultivating their global competence and actively seek out even more opportunities to engage. It was clear that these weren't just isolated events; they were pivotal moments that set a new trajectory.

On the flip side, participants who described only limited or superficial exposure to international contexts, or whose experiences lacked real depth and sustained engagement, reported far fewer noticeable benefits in developing global competence. Participant 37, an undergraduate student majoring in French, shared a particularly telling example of a superficial experience:

"I used to take a virtual internship with an international organization. I really did not feel any help with global competence. I did not feel my growth... due to the Covid-19, all contact was through online. No help with my communication skills or cultural understanding." (Participant 37)

Similarly, students who had only engaged in short-term, tourist-style international travel often reported minimal personal growth in terms of global competence. The wide range in the quality and perceived benefits of these past international activities vividly illustrates the "iterational" dimension of global competence development described by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) [14]. This suggests that simply being in an international setting doesn't automatically lead to the desired learning outcomes. The depth of engagement, the opportunities for reflection, and the active processing of these experiences seem to be absolutely critical for real growth.

Looking forward, students' future plans and aspirations also emerged as an incredibly powerful factor influencing how much they felt they needed global competence and how much they engaged with it. Echoing earlier research [33], our participants often saw global competence as an added bonus rather than a core, essential skill, unless their future paths explicitly involved studying or working abroad. A common explanation was that domestic employers in China didn't openly prioritize global competence in their hiring decisions. They felt that if they weren't planning to move abroad, they wouldn't really face significant culture shock or need sophisticated global perspectives and skills in their daily lives or careers. As Participant 2, a master's student in education, thoughtfully observed:

"I don't think global competence is a necessity for every student. However, it holds significant value for those planning to venture abroad. In a domestic setting, the benefits of possessing a global perspective and knowledge may not be as pronounced when seeking employment opportunities." (Participant 2)

This perspective highlights a very pragmatic, context-dependent way of valuing GC. It's about what's immediately useful and relevant to their perceived future.

Conversely, participants who clearly aimed for substantial international experience in their future—like pursuing postgraduate studies overseas or securing a job in an international or globally oriented company—consistently

saw global competence as absolutely vital for their success. Participant 20 commented: "[Academic course] credits alone will not help me adapt to living abroad... I must improve my ability in communication, adaptation, and participate in as many activities as possible." Another student remarked: "Going abroad pushes me to learn about other cultures and theory in my field so I won't be lost later" (Participant 7). These students' future goals and the careful plans they made to achieve them vividly reflect the "intentionality" and "forethought" aspects of agency, as described by Bandura (2006) [2], as well as the "projectivity" dimension discussed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) [14]. While their past experiences had a mixed influence, their future aspirations and well-defined plans provided a much clearer and stronger indication of how they perceived and actively engaged with developing global competence. They were shaping their present actions based on their desired future.

4.1.2. Self-Efficacy

In line with the theories of Bandura (1989, 2006) [1, 2] and Ryan and Deci (2017) [44], our study powerfully highlights the crucial role of self-efficacy – that is, a person's belief in their own capabilities – as a strong enabler or catalyst for driving active engagement in global competence development. Participants who had a strong sense of self-efficacy, meaning they truly believed in their ability to successfully carry out actions, actively sought out global learning experiences. This pattern aligns perfectly with Bandura's findings: when people feel highly capable, it boosts their motivation, increases their effort, and helps them persist, even when facing tough challenges [1, 2]. Participant 20's story beautifully illustrates how strong self-efficacy works:

"I majored in French and have a good command of English, so I can easily adapt to different intercultural contexts. I've participated in many culturally related activities and felt happy and fulfilled throughout the process. That motivates me to keep engaging in such activities to further improve myself." (Participant 20)

This quote paints a picture of a positive cycle: the student's confidence in her language skills and ability to adapt to new cultures empowered her to embrace, enjoy, and learn from new intercultural activities. This, in turn, significantly fueled her intrinsic motivation to continue engaging in such experiences. Similarly, Participant 21 described interacting with internationally diverse peers as "a captivating endeavor" and consistently showed a proactive attitude towards developing global competence, all built on a strong belief in her ability to handle such interactions. Building on existing work by Huang et al. (2025) [20] about the vital role of general self-efficacy in global competence, our findings particularly emphasize the critical importance of language self-efficacy (confidence in one's language skills) and communication self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to communicate effectively across cultures). Conversely, we consistently found that a lower sense of self-efficacy in these specific areas was linked to reduced engagement and, consequently, lower levels of global competence. Students who doubted their linguistic or communicative abilities in intercultural settings tended to avoid those interactions, thereby limiting their opportunities for growth. It's a powerful reminder that belief in oneself is a key ingredient for action.

4.1.3. Motivation

Research consistently tells us that both internal (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic) factors play a big role in making students willing and eager to engage with globally oriented opportunities [53]. However, the quality and how long that engagement lasts often depend on what's primarily driving that motivation. **Extrinsic motivators**, like needing to meet curriculum requirements, wanting to boost a resume, or getting praise and encouragement from others, can certainly influence behavior in the short term. But they don't always create a lasting, deep personal commitment to global learning [44]. Echoing earlier research [37], some participants in our study, especially those in natural sciences or highly specialized technical fields, showed less inherent interest in other cultures compared to their peers in humanities or social sciences. Participant 43, for instance, explicitly stated that they had neither an innate enjoyment nor any compelling external reason to actively engage in cross-cultural experiences, especially if there were no formal course requirements to do so. Their engagement was strictly limited to what was necessary for their main academic pursuits.

In stark contrast, students who demonstrated a genuine, **intrinsic interest** in other cultures and global issues consistently showed significantly greater engagement, persistence, and depth in their efforts to develop global competence. For example, Participant 1 described how her profound passion for the history of other peoples and nations directly led her to seek out international courses in language, history, and culture, going above and beyond what was required. Similarly, Participant 19 attributed her decision to major in French and later pursue a degree in teaching Chinese as a second language to her deep intrinsic motivation and a strong desire to share and promote Chinese culture globally. These compelling cases powerfully suggest that self-determined, intrinsic motivation is a strong predictor of sustained engagement and perseverance in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed for global competence [44]. When students are truly curious and personally invested, their efforts are much stronger and more enduring. They're not just checking a box; they're following a passion.

4.2. Structural Factors

This section takes a critical look at how the larger institutional and family environments significantly shape, and sometimes limit, students' ability to actively pursue global competence. We identified three key structural factors that were particularly influential: how available and accessible international exchange programs are, the nature and extent of "Internationalization at Home" (IaH) initiatives, and the level of support students receive from their families. These factors represent the "structure" in Giddens's [15] sense, offering both opportunities and imposing barriers.

4.2.1. International Exchange Programmes

When we reviewed the official policy documents from both University A and University B, it was clear that both institutions formally express a strong commitment to internationalization and organize various international exchange programs as a way to foster global competence. However, the students' own stories painted a very different picture: despite their official existence, these programs were rarely accessible to the vast majority of students in practice. The main obstacles they cited were the incredibly high fees associated with these programs, combined with strict academic and language proficiency requirements. Together, these factors discouraged most students from even considering applying.

For example, a highly competitive Canadian exchange program at University A, which only offered 10 spots each year, demanded fees of 33,800 yuan (over USD $4500), on top of visa and travel expenses. Such substantial financial barriers to international exchanges, which affect the overwhelming majority of students, stand in stark contrast to the universities' stated goals of nurturing global competence in all students. As Participant 1 eloquently put it:

"Our school aims to cultivate individuals with a global perspective... but this is not reflected in the entire educational system. Students are not provided with enough opportunities in this regard. If I were to participate in an exchange program, in addition to the tuition fees, I would also have to bear a significant cost." (Participant 1)

This sentiment was echoed by many interviewees who genuinely wanted to experience other countries but were ultimately deterred by the steep costs and demanding prerequisites.

At the national level, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) does offer some funding for overseas study. However, these scholarships are extremely limited in number and are primarily given to postgraduate students on very specific bilateral programs (like China-Ireland or China-Colombia scholarships). This means that funded exchange opportunities are only available to a tiny fraction of students. In our study, only two participants had managed to join exchange programs organized by their universities, and notably, they had to cover the substantial expenses entirely themselves. This situation clearly highlights the **"elitization" of international experience** [13, 18], where access to global opportunities is largely determined by a student's socioeconomic background rather than being a universal educational provision. The structural limitations imposed by these financial and academic hurdles severely restrict students' ability to actively pursue global learning experiences abroad.

4.2.2. Internationalization at Home (IaH) Provision

Internationalization at Home (IaH) has become increasingly important as a key part of comprehensive internationalization strategies, especially given the limitations of sending students abroad [13, 18]. Ideally, IaH means purposefully weaving international and intercultural dimensions into both the formal curriculum and the informal campus life for *all* students within their own country. However, our study's findings reveal that the availability and effectiveness of IaH vary significantly across different schools and academic disciplines within the two universities.

Specifically, schools that focus on foreign language education or international studies showed much stronger IaH provision. These departments typically had more foreign academics, actively promoted a deeper understanding of global issues through specialized courses, and offered more accessible opportunities for internships with international organizations or direct interactions with people from different nationalities. As one student from the School of Foreign Studies explained:

"Our school does place a lot of emphasis on it... We have courses such as 'History of Foreign Literature' and 'History of Western Aesthetics.... I have also previously taken a course on 'International Relations' and 'Diplomacy of Major Powers.' These may help me understand some local, global and cross-cultural issues." (Participant 11)

This suggests that within these specific academic environments, the structure is more supportive and enabling for GC development.

In contrast, participants from other schools (like natural sciences or engineering) noted that while some lecturers might occasionally include content related to foreign countries, it was often limited to specific subject matter and largely lacked a dedicated focus on intercultural communication, broader global issues, or critical global awareness. In these contexts, achieving high academic performance within their specific subject remained the overwhelming priority. As Participant 8, a PhD student in physics, observed:

"Everything, from curriculum design to research facilities, serves the goal of academic enhancement. This fosters tolerance and understanding of diverse academic views. However, culturally, universities and departments do not emphasize this." (Participant 8)

Participant 8's comments reflect the pervasive influence of

the "testocratic meritocracy" [17, 25] that deeply permeates the Chinese education system. This system places immense importance on academic achievement, which heavily dictates how curricula are designed, how students are assessed (mostly through high-stakes exams), and how grades are given [19]. Even though Universities A and B do offer some non-academic grants and awards, like the "Social Practice Scholarship" and "Cultural Activities Scholarship," our interviews and policy documents suggest that these awards are rarely recognized or given much weight when it comes to selecting students for prestigious scholarships or honors. As a result, global and intercultural learning largely remains on the sidelines within these institutions as a whole. It fails to become a core part of the mainstream educational experience for most students.

Beyond the classroom, opportunities for meaningful intercultural activities and sustained communication between domestic and foreign students were also noticeably limited. International students made up only about 1% of the total student population at both universities. Despite sharing the same campus, they were often largely separated, typically enrolled in and based within specialized international schools and living in designated residential areas. Consistent with findings by McKenzie and Baldassar (2017) [36], participants reported significant challenges in forming lasting friendships with foreign students, who tended to stick together due to shared cultural backgrounds and language. As Participant 6 stated, "I see them [exchange students] on campus, but it feels odd to say hello since our lives don't intersect." This structural segregation, combined with the strong academic prioritization, creates a significant barrier to organic, everyday intercultural learning opportunities, thereby limiting students' ability to develop GC through their daily interactions.

4.2.3. Family Support

The family unit is the most immediate and fundamental context for a person's development, as highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model [7]. In situations where universities might offer only limited or inaccessible opportunities for students to engage in activities that support global competence, the importance of family support in making that participation possible becomes incredibly significant.

In line with existing research on international student mobility [13, 18, 31], our study consistently found that most participants who were able to pursue overseas education or engage in highly globally oriented programs benefited from substantial financial support and active encouragement from their families. These families typically held values that prioritized exposure to diverse cultures and international educational experiences, seeing them as invaluable for their children's overall development. Crucially, they had the financial means to cover the significant tuition fees, living costs, and travel expenses associated with such international endeavors. Participant 15, for example, recalled that from a young age, their family frequently traveled internationally and actively encouraged learning about the world beyond what was taught in formal schooling. This kind of supportive and privileged upbringing fostered an early awareness of other cultures and instilled a sense of confidence as students navigated unfamiliar contexts [7].

Conversely, students from families with more limited financial resources or those who held more traditional views about overseas education faced significant hurdles. Participants reported that their families often expressed deep concerns about issues like safety abroad, how foreign degrees would be valued in the highly competitive Chinese job market, and language barriers. These concerns often led families to strongly encourage more conventional domestic academic and career paths [31]. Even in cases where families could financially afford overseas tuition, some parents remained firmly against such international pursuits due to various worries. For instance, Participants 1 and 4 explicitly stated that they had reluctantly given up their long-held plans to study abroad primarily because of strong family resistance. As a direct result of these combined institutional and familial constraints, students in these situations were often steered towards low-cost, domestically accessible forms of global engagement, such as passively consuming foreign media or engaging in limited online interactions. While these activities offered some exposure, they typically lacked the depth, richness, and immersive in-person experiences that are crucial for truly comprehensive GC development. This clearly shows how the family microsystem, operating within the broader macrosystem of societal values and economic realities, can either empower or severely restrict a student's choices regarding global competence.

4.3. Exercising Agency

Shaped by the intricate interplay of personal orientations and structural factors we've discussed, our qualitative data revealed four distinct ways students exercised their agency in developing global competence. These profiles illustrate the varied paths Chinese university students take on their journey toward global readiness.

4.3.1. Proactive Agency

The first profile, which we called **proactive agency**, was seen in only a small number of our participants (11 out of 52). About two-thirds of these students were enrolled in programs focused on languages or international studies (like foreign languages or international relations). As we mentioned earlier, these academic environments naturally include more internationally focused curricula, often teach in two languages, and generally encourage a greater

awareness of global issues. Students who showed proactive agency typically chose these schools because they had a strong **intrinsic motivation** and genuine passion for these subjects, combined with a solid sense of **self-efficacy** in global and cultural engagement. Most of these proactive participants had either studied abroad, taken part in international programs, or were actively planning to do so soon, clearly showing a "projective" dimension to their agency [14] – they were looking to the future and planning for it.

However, even for these highly motivated students, the opportunities provided by their universities often didn't quite meet their expectations for truly meaningful and comprehensive global engagement. Even students in language or international studies programs described their exposure as largely confined to classroom learning, with a noticeable lack of extracurricular opportunities for practical application. Participant 11 from the School of Foreign Studies explained that despite the international aspects built into her school's courses:

"These courses hardly improve our practical skills; we need to go outside class to seek more opportunities." (Participant 11)

This perceived shortage of practical or non-academic internationalized experiences was a consistent concern among proactive students at both universities.

In response to this gap in institutional support, many proactive students actively sought to expand their global competence skills through independent initiatives and informal engagement outside their formal studies. For example, Participant 28, driven by her passion for language and intercultural communication, took the initiative to start and organize a weekly English Corner on campus. This became a much-needed informal space for interested students to practice English and engage in cross-cultural conversations. Other proactive students reported extensively engaging with global media (like international news or documentaries), actively seeking out and building cross-cultural friendships (both online and with the limited number of international students on campus), applying for international internships and volunteer programs (often finding these opportunities themselves), or enrolling in relevant online courses from international platforms. These self-initiated actions strongly supported the participants' innate psychological needs for **autonomy and competence** (Ryan & Deci, 2017) [44]. They felt empowered to proactively plan and create new opportunities, even when their universities didn't offer strong support [30]. Their agency was marked by a sustained, self-directed pursuit of global learning, showing a flexible and adaptive way of dealing with environmental limitations.

4.3.2. Strategic Agency

We used the term **strategic agency** to describe students who showed a clear willingness to engage in specific activities to build global competence, but whose main reason for doing so was primarily **extrinsic and instrumental**. Their motivation often came from immediate academic goals or career prospects, rather than a deep, genuine interest in other cultures [44]. Sixteen participants fit this profile, making up a significant portion of our student sample.

For these students, engaging with global content was often a means to an end, directly supporting their core academic or professional objectives. Participant 33, a postgraduate engineering student, put it very clearly: "All the top journals related to my field are English [language] journals, so I have to improve my English level to read them." Similarly, Participant 16, a postgraduate student of materials science, observed: "All the literature I read is in English. If you want to publish high-level articles, it must be in English." This perspective was very common among other participants in this group, especially those in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. They regularly engaged with global content through their required courses (like reading international research papers) and carefully honed their English skills to help them understand and write international academic literature. But they did this *only* if these activities directly aligned with their immediate academic or professional goals.

Beyond the narrow scope of their disciplinary requirements, these students generally showed limited interest in actively seeking out intercultural communication or other broader activities designed to build comprehensive global competence. Participant 36, an automotive engineering major, stated very explicitly: "I am not interested in foreign cultures. I read a lot of English literature on my disciplinary field, but not on culture." These students often felt that their immediate social and professional environment in China didn't require them to prioritize broader intercultural skills or develop a sense of global citizenship, especially if they planned to stay in China for their education and future careers. Their selective engagement in only certain aspects of global competence clearly shows a utilitarian view of these skills: they saw them as valuable mainly for achieving academic goals (like good grades or publishing research) or career advantages (like understanding international industry trends), rather than as important goals in themselves. This type of agency is highly rational and adaptable to the prevailing "scores first" environment [24], but it often lacks the breadth and depth that characterize truly proactive global engagement.

4.3.3. Constrained Agency

Students who exhibited **constrained agency** valued global competence in theory and often expressed a genuine desire for intercultural communication and international engagement, including strong ambitions to study or travel abroad. However, they typically lacked the necessary

support from their university or family to turn these dreams into reality. Fifteen students fell into this category, representing a significant part of our student population whose personal desires were limited by the circumstances around them. Their situation points to a type of agency that is held back and restricted by external factors, rather than being freely and proactively put into practice [30].

First, as we explained in the "Structural Factors" section, the universities simply didn't offer enough support for students to go abroad or for Internationalization at Home (IaH). Participants consistently highlighted that global competence, despite being frequently mentioned in official university statements, remained largely ignored in practice. Participant 9 remarked:

"Global competence may be addressed in some institutional policy, but no concrete actions were taken." (Participant 9)

This perceived gap between what was promised and what was actually delivered created a sense of frustration among students with constrained agency. They felt that the opportunities they longed for simply weren't available or accessible to them. The high costs and limited scholarships for study abroad programs, along with the insufficient development of comprehensive IaH initiatives, directly prevented them from pursuing their global aspirations.

Second, participants often pointed to significant limitations coming from their home environment, especially from their families. They reported that their families frequently worried about issues like safety abroad, how foreign degrees would be seen in China's highly competitive job market, and language barriers. These concerns often led families to strongly encourage more traditional domestic academic and career paths [31]. Even when families could afford overseas tuition, some parents were still firmly against international pursuits due to various fears. For instance, Participants 1 and 4 explicitly stated that they had reluctantly given up their long-held plans to study abroad mainly because of strong resistance from their families. As a direct result of these combined institutional and family limitations, students with constrained agency were often channeled into cheaper, more accessible forms of global engagement within China, such as passively consuming foreign media or engaging in limited online interactions. While these activities offered some exposure, they typically lacked the depth, richness, and immersive in-person experiences that are crucial for truly comprehensive GC development. Their agency, though present in their desire, was therefore severely limited by the external structures of their environment, clearly demonstrating the profound influence of the mesosystem and exosystem on individual action [7].

4.3.4. Minimal Agency

A profile of **minimal agency** applied to about one-fifth of the participants in our study. These students generally didn't actively look for global learning opportunities, and even when such chances came up, they often chose not to participate or engaged only superficially. They showed a general lack of interest in pursuing global competence. The main reason these students gave for their minimal engagement was that they saw global competence as having limited usefulness or relevance to their immediate lives. It didn't align with their personal interests or any compelling external goals or requirements.

For example, Participant 50, a professional doctorate candidate in a very specialized field, was almost entirely focused on developing practical skills within his discipline, as required by Chinese industry standards. He explicitly turned down publicly funded international exchange programs, explaining that any potential benefits from such an experience would be outweighed by the effort needed to readjust to the domestic academic and professional context upon his return. Similarly, Participant 18, despite being in an internationally oriented program, didn't have a strong personal commitment to global learning. With no concrete plans to study or work internationally, his general feeling was that broader global or intercultural skills simply weren't relevant to his immediate academic and career goals.

Participant 45's story vividly shows how dynamic and flexible agency can be, demonstrating how it can be sparked or reduced depending on changing circumstances and perceptions [27]:

"Although I did have this fleeting thought that going abroad and communicating with foreigners would be great. And I did make many efforts on that... But my language skills aren't that strong. Now I have shifted my focus to staying in China... I felt like there's nothing much here that really requires international engagement, so I just let go of that aspect." (Participant 45)

This participant's narrative reveals an initial spark of proactive agency, which then faded as her aspirations shifted and her belief in her own abilities (self-efficacy) weakened. In her case, low self-efficacy, particularly concerning her language proficiency, became a significant barrier. Indeed, most participants who showed minimal agency consistently described their English skills as poor and openly admitted that the idea of talking with foreigners or navigating unfamiliar intercultural situations made them anxious. Participant 44 stated: "I want to improve my English, but I don't feel talented in it." Participant 40 felt that "it would be too intimidating to talk with international students... my English is poor." When students feel that a situation's demands are greater than their perceived abilities, their self-efficacy drops, stress increases, and they tend to avoid active learning strategies, defaulting instead to avoidance behaviors [41]. This highlights how a lack of confidence, combined with a perceived lack of relevance, can lead to a complete disengagement from developing global competence.

DISCUSSION

This study set out on an in-depth exploration of how Chinese university students develop global competence across two different institutions. We paid special attention to understanding how both personal factors and broader societal structures intricately influence students' active choices in pursuing this vital skill. Our findings clearly show that, just as theories of agency suggest, there's a dynamic interplay between individual effort and the resources available in their environment [3, 51]. This complex mix creates distinct and observable patterns in how students exercise their agency. We identified four unique types of agency: proactive, strategic, constrained, and minimal. Interestingly, most students fell into the categories of limited agency (either strategic or constrained) or minimal agency. Only a small group truly demonstrated proactive agency in their pursuit of global competence. Across all these different profiles, three main factors consistently emerged as crucial ingredients shaping how students put their agency into practice: their confidence in their ability to develop global competence, how useful they perceived global competence to be, and how accessible relevant opportunities and resources were.

When it comes to **students' confidence in their capacity**, our study strongly echoes what existing models of global competence and self-efficacy research have consistently highlighted: confidence in English language proficiency and communication skills are key indicators and powerful enablers of this competence [21, 42, 45, 48]. Our findings showed a clear link: proactive agency was strongly associated with good language skills and a genuine interest in other cultures. In contrast, minimal agency was characterized by students reporting poor English and little enthusiasm for international communication. This suggests a powerful two-way relationship: confidence encourages engagement, and engagement, in turn, builds more confidence. Previous research, often focusing on international students or domestic students in international programs, has found that students tend to actively work on improving their English proficiency despite challenges [32]. Our study aligns with this: students who showed proactive agency actively sought to develop their global competence, even when their universities offered limited support. Conversely, those with minimal agency and weaker English skills tended to actively avoid meaningful intercultural interactions, ultimately limiting their global engagement. These different findings highlight how important it is to consider the specific research context and student profiles when exploring student agency and the subtle roles played by other influencing factors. In the Chinese context, with its unique academic pressures and strong emphasis on specific forms of achievement, it seems that self-efficacy has an even greater impact on a student's willingness to engage with GC.

The **perceived usefulness of global competence** emerged as another incredibly influential factor. This refers to how much a student feels that developing global competence aligns with their personal goals and the immediate demands of their environment. Earlier research has emphasized how early education and international exposure help cultivate positive attitudes towards global competence [9, 37, 53]. Our study takes this discussion further by showing that students' agency dynamically interacts with contextual factors to shape their perceptions of usefulness, and consequently, their participation. In particular, two dimensions of agency, as theorized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) [14], are very relevant here: the **projective dimension** and the **practical-evaluative dimension**. Students who had clear, culturally motivated goals and well-defined plans for future international experiences (like studying abroad or pursuing international careers) consistently showed a strong "projective" drive in their proactive agency. This future-oriented vision propelled them to actively seek out activities and opportunities to build their global competence [51]. On the other hand, students without such clear aspirations tended to see global competence as an optional extra rather than a core, essential skill. This reflects a more limited and instrumental understanding of its value. Many of these students narrowly associated global competence only with overseas study or specific international jobs, overlooking its broader meaning as a multifaceted skill set involving openness, curiosity, tolerance, critical thinking, and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives [42, 48]. Within this narrow interpretation, the "practical-evaluative" side of agency becomes especially prominent, as students' choices are heavily shaped by immediate concerns and specific contextual requirements [3, 14]. In our research context, the entire Chinese education system, with its intense focus on academic achievement and examination success, is clearly a significant structural influence on how students perceive the usefulness of developing global competence.

Our study strongly suggests that the university environment in China is deeply influenced by the values of a **testocratic meritocracy** [17, 25]. This system places academic success, intense competition, and individual achievement above the broader goal of preparing all students holistically for a complex global future. As participants thought about their prospects in a rapidly changing world, most were primarily focused on how to boost their personal competitiveness within the domestic system, rather than how they might contribute to global development or engage as global citizens. This observation aligns with Labaree's (1997) [25] sharp analysis that testocratic meritocracies prioritize testing over comprehensive training and competition over collaboration. Students who showed limited or no engagement in developing global competence often took the pragmatic view that putting effort into this area wouldn't

directly help their academic success or career advancement within the current system, making it seem less useful to them. This powerful structural influence profoundly shapes their choices and actions.

Finally, let's talk about the **availability and accessibility of resources** for developing global competence, which is a critical factor influencing students' agency. Our study clearly showed how limited opportunities and support for international experiences, whether abroad or through Internationalization at Home (IaH) initiatives, significantly held back participants' efforts to develop global competence. The extremely high costs associated with international exchanges are a huge barrier for many Chinese students, further reinforcing the "**elitization**" of international experience [13, 18]. Students who do participate in formal international programs typically come from families with the financial resources and cultural values that actively support cross-cultural educational experiences. While IaH initiatives have immense potential to make global learning more accessible to everyone, our study found that these initiatives are not yet well-established or consistently implemented across all disciplines and institutions in China. The development of IHE in China, despite the nation's growing global influence, remains uneven [46]. International staff and resources tend to be concentrated in universities located in more economically advanced regions. Universities in second-tier cities, like University A and B in our study, face greater challenges in attracting and keeping global talent and in developing comprehensive internationalized curricula. As a result, domestic students in these less internationalized settings have few university-led opportunities for meaningful intercultural experiences or deep learning about global issues beyond what's specific to their academic field. In such environments, a comprehensive global competence agenda struggles to take root, and students' agency is significantly limited by the lack of accessible and relevant resources.

Our study makes several important contributions to the existing research on global competence and student agency. By specifically focusing on domestic Chinese university students, it fills a notable gap in research, especially in a non-Western context. It offers a nuanced understanding of how students' agency isn't just about overcoming challenges, but also about strategically adapting to and negotiating within existing structural limitations. Identifying four distinct profiles of agency—proactive, strategic, constrained, and minimal—enriches our current understanding of how domestic students in Chinese universities exercise their agency in response to complex societal conditions. This helps us understand that agency is dynamic, relational, and dependent on its social context [3, 27]. While previous research often discusses the importance of GC and the internationalization of higher education [10, 11, 20, 21, 29, 37], our study provides a unique, student-centered perspective on how learners *themselves* actively engage with this agenda, even when they face tough competing priorities. It expands our understanding of agency beyond formal university settings to include the informal and self-directed learning that's becoming increasingly common in our digital world.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While our study offers rich and insightful qualitative data about how Chinese university students exercise their agency in developing global competence, it's important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. Because we relied on qualitative methods, which allow for deep exploration of personal experiences, our findings aren't directly generalizable to the entire population of Chinese university students [10]. Our purposive sampling strategy, though designed to get a diverse range of perspectives, doesn't allow us to make statistical conclusions about a broader demographic.

Future research could greatly benefit from using a **mixed-methods approach**, combining the rich insights of qualitative inquiry with the wider reach of quantitative data. For example, a large-scale survey could give us a more comprehensive understanding of how common these identified agentic behaviors are and what factors influence them across a larger, more representative sample of Chinese university students. Additionally, **longitudinal research designs**—studies that follow the same individuals over a long period—could offer a deeper understanding of how students' active engagement evolves over time. This would allow us to track how their priorities, motivations, and strategies for GC development change as they progress through their academic careers, face new career pressures, and experience different life events.

There are also several exciting avenues for future research:

- **Comparative Studies:** It would be fascinating to investigate differences in how students approach agency across various types of universities (e.g., elite vs. regional institutions), different academic fields (e.g., arts vs. sciences), or even across different regions within China. This could reveal more specific insights into how particular contexts impact student agency.
- **Intervention Studies:** Researchers could design and test the effectiveness of specific university-led programs aimed at fostering student agency in GC development. This might include studies on the impact of redesigned curricula, innovative IaH initiatives, mentorship programs, or targeted workshops designed to boost students' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. What really works to empower students?
- **Faculty Perspectives:** Exploring the viewpoints of university faculty and administrators on student agency in GC development could provide a more complete picture. This might help identify any gaps or misalignments between what institutions intend and what actually happens in teaching and learning.

- **Impact of Digital Learning:** A more focused investigation into the specific ways digital platforms and virtual interactions contribute to self-initiated GC development would be incredibly valuable. How can universities better leverage these trends to support students?
- **Role of Specific Cultural Values:** A deeper exploration of how unique Chinese cultural values (like collectivism, the emphasis on harmony, or filial piety) might specifically shape how student agency manifests in this context could offer even more nuanced understandings.
- **Self-Efficacy Interventions:** Researchers could specifically design and test interventions aimed at boosting students' self-efficacy in language and intercultural communication. Then, they could measure the subsequent impact on how actively students engage with GC.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these future research directions, we can build a more comprehensive and practical understanding of how to effectively cultivate global competence among university students in China and in similar contexts around the world.

CONCLUSION

To wrap things up, our study has carefully examined the subtle yet powerful ways Chinese university students actively use their agency to develop global competence, even when it's not their single, overriding priority. Our findings show that students' engagement is a blend of strategically adapting to tough competing demands, proactively seeking out learning opportunities on their own, and resiliently navigating obstacles by finding informal support. These diverse approaches to agency clearly demonstrate that students are resourceful and adaptable learners. They consistently find ways to cultivate global competence within the complex and often challenging educational and societal landscape of China.

The fact that we identified four distinct types of agency—proactive, strategic, constrained, and minimal—significantly enriches the current research. It gives us a more detailed understanding of how domestic students in Chinese universities exercise their agency in response to the prevailing societal conditions. This reinforces the idea that agency isn't just an isolated ability; it's inherently dynamic, relational, and dependent on its social context [3, 27]. When a student's personal inclinations (like their self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation) align with the support they receive from their environment (like university programs and family encouragement), it powerfully influences their motivated engagement and growth. Conversely, if their aspirations don't match the available resources, it can severely limit their agency, leading to feelings of being held back or even disengagement [52]. In our study, it became clear that the support for comprehensive global competence development was unfortunately limited. The perceived lack of strong university provisions and consistent family support often left participants feeling less motivated, without clear guidance, or unsure about whether and how to prioritize developing global competence.

For educators, university administrators, and policymakers in China and other countries facing similar challenges, our findings offer crucial and actionable insights. First, there's an urgent need to explicitly acknowledge, value, and actively support students' self-initiated efforts in developing global competence. Universities could create accessible online resources, foster peer-led learning communities, and set up platforms for virtual international collaboration, thereby validating and amplifying these informal learning paths. Second, universities must strive to offer more accessible and affordable opportunities for global engagement. This means not only revitalizing and making international exchange programs more equitable but also implementing truly comprehensive and integrated Internationalization at Home (IaH) initiatives. This requires rethinking financial barriers and committing to embedding intercultural and global dimensions across *all* curricula, not just in specialized language or international studies departments. Third, it's absolutely essential to clearly connect global competence development to students' immediate academic goals and their long-term career aspirations. By showing the tangible benefits of GC for academic success, research opportunities, and employability in both domestic and international job markets, universities can boost its perceived usefulness and elevate its priority among students.

Ultimately, rather than relying solely on top-down directives or limited, exclusive programs, the key lies in fostering student agency and empowering learners to truly take ownership of their global learning journeys. This calls for a fundamental shift in institutional culture and how teaching is approached. By understanding and valuing students' diverse ways of exercising agency, and by actively working to reduce the structural barriers they face, universities can more effectively prepare graduates who are not only academically proficient but also genuinely globally competent. These graduates will be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to critically engage with, adapt to, and meaningfully contribute to our increasingly complex and interconnected world. This holistic approach is vital for nurturing a generation of graduates who are truly ready to thrive as responsible global citizens.

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