

Study on Social, Emotional and Learning Experience of Chinese University International Doctoral Students During COVID-19 : Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the social, emotional, and learning experiences of international doctoral students enrolled at Chinese universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses in particular on students who were required to continue their programmes online while residing either outside China or on Chinese campuses under varying degrees of public-health restrictions. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with four first-year international PhD students. It analyses the data through the lens of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) theory. The findings show that students experienced: (a) in the social domain, reduced opportunities for informal interaction, limited access to academic networks, and delays in communication with supervisors and teachers; (b) in the emotional domain, loneliness, uncertainty about academic trajectories, and strong social and self-imposed expectations; and (c) in the learning domain, language barriers, unstable internet access, and fewer opportunities for discussion and feedback. At the same time, participants demonstrated high motivation, drew on family and peer support, and engaged in active problem-solving to cope with challenges. The study argues that social, emotional, and learning experiences are closely intertwined and jointly shape students' ability to progress in their studies. It concludes by outlining implications for universities and supervisors, including the need to integrate SEL-informed support, strengthen communication and feedback mechanisms, and provide targeted academic and psychosocial services for international doctoral students during and beyond crises.

Keywords: Covid-19, Chinese international PhD students, social experience, emotional experience, learning experience

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 Pandemic a public health emergency and an international concern from January 2020 to the present, causing the most significant disruption of education systems in history (United Nations, 2020). Along with this, the experience of international students during the epidemic is another focus. It does not excuse international students in China, who have been experiencing how "the outbreak suddenly halted studying, travelling and socialising" (Yang, 2020, p. 3). However, researchers have ignored international students even though they are one of the most vulnerable population groups during COVID-19 (Firang, 2020). Chen et al. (2020) even called them "the overlooked minority" (p. 1). This phenomenon is evident in China and globally, as most international students returned home during the semester break when the lockdown occurred. As a result, COVID-19 brought socio-psychological problems to international students (Fakhar-E-Alam Kulyar et al., 2020). Therefore, reviewing the social and emotional experiences of international students can offer a broader perspective on how the environment and the social and cultural context influence the process and quality of learning.

Thus, some recent studies have investigated international students' emotional experiences in Australia and Vietnam (Pham & Shi, 2020; Supiani et al., 2020). However, there is little research on the social, emotional, and learning experiences of Chinese international PhD students in China and abroad during the COVID-19

Pandemic. This group of students and their experiences requires closer attention. The students are under much pressure, as their course learning and research activities require active collaboration and interaction with peers and other members of the scientific community to exchange experiences, information, and knowledge and to develop their learning and research skills. Being in the vacuum of their home country and able to communicate only online, many students can feel lost and separated from the educational environment, which can affect motivation and final learning outcomes. Students in almost all countries, especially students in special positions and situations, are forced to change how they study and move to online learning. They encountered new emotional and social experiences during their studies, and unique problems emerged that could strongly influence learning quality and effectiveness. It is believed that personal attributes, such as self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills, largely determine students' emotional and social experiences. These qualities are core components of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) theory that we applied in our study. Considering all these, our research will aim at demonstrating the situation of social, emotional, and educational experiences of Chinese international Ph.D. students living outside and inside China during the COVID-19 Pandemic, try to describe the challenges they faced, and explore how they deal with them and their ideas about their learning, to help them do better and improve their educational quality and effectiveness.

Against this background, the present study focuses on international doctoral students enrolled in Chinese universities who continued their programmes online during the COVID-19 pandemic, either outside China or on campus. It seeks to contribute to the literature in three ways: by foregrounding doctoral, rather than undergraduate or master's, students; by examining social, emotional, and learning experiences together rather than in isolation; and by using SEL theory as an analytical lens. Guided by these aims, the study addresses the following questions: (1) How do international doctoral students at Chinese universities studying outside China during COVID-19 describe their social, emotional, and learning experiences? (2) What social, emotional, and educational challenges do they report? (3) How do they cope with these challenges? and (4) In what ways do the experiences of students outside China and those on Chinese campuses converge or differ?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chinese universities, both inside and outside China, told international PhD students to continue their studies online due to COVID-19 restrictions worldwide. Emotional intelligence helps students self-determine their internal emotional state and analyse their social and educational experiences during the pandemic. According to Goleman (Goleman, 2020, p. 32), students can "motivate themselves and persevere in the face of disappointment... regulate their moods and prevent stress from overwhelming their ability to think..." Moreover, awareness and understanding of the emotional experience gained help international students cope with intrapersonal and external social pressure, which, in turn, improves the quality of their learning and results. Therefore, carefully considering the Social and Emotional Learning theory better fits this research.

The concept of social learning is often referred to as modelling. The leading representative of this concept is the American psychologist Albert Bandura (1986), who has conducted extensive scientific research demonstrating that children learn behaviour by observing others. For example, sharing, aggression, collaboration, social interaction, and delaying gratification.

Thus, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the ability to recognise and manage one's emotions, problem-solving effectively and establish positive relationships with others, "competencies that all learners need" (Zins & Elias, 2006, p. 1). As described by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL focuses on the interplay among behaviour, cognition, and emotion during learning. SEL is acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to classify and manage emotions; to develop care and concern for others; to make responsible decisions; to build positive relationships; and to cope with difficult situations. As a result, we can define SEL as a process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to build a strong identity, regulate emotions and obtain individual and collective goals, feel and express sympathy for others, establish and maintain effective relationships, and make accountable and compassionate decisions. Just as students learn academic skills, they also know, practice, and apply SEL skills through positive activities in and out of the classroom. The initial skills they acquire improve over time and become more detailed and integrated to cope with the increasingly challenging situations students

face in academics, social relationships, citizenship, and health. (CASEL Guide Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, 2012) These differences help put all students on a level playing field for success; SEL aims to help students understand their thoughts and emotions, become more self-aware, and grow more empathetic with others in their community.

SEL is integral to education and human development. SEL programs enhance students' ability to integrate cognition, affect, and behaviour to deal effectively with everyday tasks and problems. Like many related approaches, the areas of CASEL include knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies.

Generic SEL statements have proven extremely useful in conventional educational settings, but there is an urgent need to use the SEL concept (Rosanbalm, 2021). The COVID-19 Pandemic simultaneously introduced new stress factors in the lives of students, completely changed the way they communicate with teachers and classmates, the forms of homework tasks, finally computerised the way to find the necessary information and teaching materials, as well as the social and learned climate during the learning process (Smith, 2020). Thus, in addition to many difficulties faced by students who lost loved ones due to viruses, they worry about the danger to the health and safety of themselves and their loved ones, as well as about social isolation too (Palacios Garay et al., 2020; Perez-Dominguez et al., 2021) so, online education has become difficult. A survey conducted among students in France showed that depression (43%), anxiety (39.19%), and distress (42.94%) scores were much higher than before COVID-19 (Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020). These emotions are triggered by the stress hormone, chemically produced by the body during stress, which affects our thoughts, emotions, and physical well-being in ways that are not always helpful. Adrenaline and cortisol significantly raise feelings of anxiety and aggression, as well as disrupt sleep and worsen the general physical condition. Stress also negatively affects activity in the "thinking" parts of the brain that govern concentration, problem-solving, learning, and impulse control. Hence, prolonged periods of stress can induce changes in brain structure and function, which can cause long-term impairments to memory, attention, mood, decision-making, and impulse control (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Unlike Goleman's concept, which includes four core characteristics, SEL consists of five core competencies that are taught, practised, and strengthened through programming (CASEL Guide Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, 2012): (a) self-awareness-identification and recognition of one's own emotions, recognition of strengths in self and others, sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence; (b) social awareness - empathy, respect for others, and perspective-taking; (c) responsible decision making- evaluation and reflection, and personal and ethical responsibility; (d) self-management- impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, and motivation; (e) relationship skills- cooperation, help with seeking, providing and communicating. Thus, the empathy described in Goleman's theory has been divided into two more clearly defined competencies - social awareness and responsible decision-making.

Thus, prolonged stress can negatively affect students' emotional state and the quality of education. Using the term "social life," we mean not only socially active connections connected with obtaining an education at the university - students, professors, and representatives of ISO, but also the unique environment of students. We have linked university social ties to personal ones because, outside the university campus and even outside China, students faced additional external social influence from relatives and friends. Family and close social support can help students stabilise their emotional background and continue their studies with calm confidence, ultimately improving the quality of education.

The social, emotional, and educational experiences of international university students, both within and outside the country in which they study, are directly interconnected, especially during the Pandemic. It is impossible to separate emotional from social and educational, and educational from social and emotional.

Based on the theory of SEL, we used the five critical competencies described above to understand how students assess their situation today, feelings and emotions associated with being in their homeland, educational experience gained during online learning, personal and social experience, problems that students encountered during online learning and unique ways to solve them. At the end of the analytical part of this study, it is possible to check for potential changes in the academic performance of university graduate students through their social and emotional experiences analysed through the prism of SEL theory. Based on previous statements, the

research's ultimate goal is to determine the impact of international students' emotional and social experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether this impact affects students' learning effectiveness. Therefore, we expect that research results will help international students at Chinese universities studying abroad improve their learning.

In this study, we use SEL as a sensitising framework for interpreting three interrelated domains of experience. By social expertise, we refer to students' opportunities and constraints in building and maintaining relationships with peers, supervisors, teachers, family members, and broader communities. Emotional experience relates to students' self-reported feelings and affective states linked to their studies and everyday lives during the pandemic, including both negative (e.g., anxiety, fear, loneliness) and positive (e.g., satisfaction, hope) valence emotions. A learning experience is understood as students' perceptions of the quality and organisation of their academic work, including access to learning resources, interaction in online classes, teacher feedback, and perceived progress in research and coursework. These domains are analysed in relation to the five SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to gain an in-depth understanding of how international doctoral students made sense of their social, emotional, and learning experiences during the pandemic. Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, the research sought analytical depth by examining a small number of information-rich cases. SEL theory was used as a guiding, but not rigid, analytical lens for formulating interview questions and interpreting the data.

Data collection

A qualitative research method, a semi-structured interview, was employed primarily to gain insight into the social, emotional, and educational experiences of international PhD students at Chinese universities inside and outside China during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Data collection ethics were obeyed strictly.

In total, four international doctoral students participated in the study. All were enrolled in the first year of a PhD programme at a comprehensive Chinese university and had experienced at least one whole semester of online learning during COVID-19. Three participants (from Pakistan, Thailand, and Indonesia) had started their programmes while residing outside China. They had not yet been able to enter the country at the time of the interviews. One participant (from Ghana) had spent the first semester on campus in China and then returned home, where he continued his studies online. These cases were selected because they represent typical situations of international doctoral students whose study trajectories were substantially reconfigured by travel restrictions and campus closures. Although small, this sample provided detailed, contextualised accounts of students' experiences and was considered appropriate for the study's exploratory aims.

We used non-probability purposive sampling, which is appropriate for qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). During the study, the emphasis was on a small group of participants. At the same time, descriptive statistics were appropriate for this sample. Furthermore, the convenient sampling strategy used in our study entails an independent search for volunteers who must meet specific criteria, such as being PhD students at a Chinese university. The main requirements for a positive interview approval were the student's mandatory presence outside and inside Chinese territory, having been studying online, and the availability of an Internet connection with sufficient speed for high-quality video and sound transmission. The primary data collection strategy of our research is interviewing. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, which Fontana and Frey (2000) described as "one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (p. 645). Semi-structured interviews have a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some prepared questions, yet at the same time, as Kvale (2008) noted, "there is openness to changes to sequence and question forms to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the interviewees" (p. 65). Therefore, we followed an interview protocol that included a header to record important information about the interview and instructions to follow. We created Interview Instruments (see Table 1,2,3) based on research questions and the five KEY social and emotional learning theory components. The instruments consist of broad, open-ended

questions designed to investigate doctoral students' social, emotional, and educational experiences during online education today. However, pertinent questions were posed to elicit additional information or clarify the answers. One-on-one interviews lasting 40 to 50 minutes were conducted online. Each interview was recorded via video conference using a laptop and transcribed verbatim using Dragon Naturally Speaking (2014) software to facilitate subsequent data analysis.

Data analysis

Our dataset consists of transcribed interviews and analytical memos written after each interview to facilitate analytical thinking about the data and to help remember details that may not be included in the transcripts. The data analysis software used version 12 of NVivo (NVivo [Computer Software], 2018), which ordered data, generated coding categories and memos, and cross-linked data. Interviews were transcribed, coded, categorised, and analysed on an ongoing basis. Analytically, the first coding cycle focused on staying close to participants' language by identifying descriptive and in vivo codes related to social, emotional, and learning experiences. In the second cycle, these codes were grouped into broader categories that captured recurrent patterns, such as "family as emotional support," "internet as barrier," or "pressure of expectations." Finally, the categories were interpreted in relation to the five SEL competencies, which helped to articulate how students' self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making were mobilised or strained in different situations. This iterative movement between data, codes, and theory supported the development of a coherent thematic structure for the findings. We employed an overall inductive and comparative analysis strategy. At the same time, the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (2000) and refined by Charmez (2006) was implemented. In addition, we followed Creswell's (2011) five steps of data coding, a flexible standard of codes and categories were used, and Saldana's (2012) coding manual for additional coding filters to apply in the analysis.

Validation

To avoid potential threats and test the validity of our conclusions, the following strategies, as suggested by Maxwell (1996) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015), were employed: triangulation, "rich data," member check, and peer review. To ensure the consistency and credibility of the results, we resorted to various data sources (multiple participants), thick descriptions, and data collection methods (interviews and memos). To secure respondent validation, we presented a summary of our findings to the interviewees by email, asking them if they concurred with any or all the emergent perspectives, that is, if they see their perspectives represented in any or all the reported findings. The qualitative aspect of this study inherently provides rich data. To identify validity threats, biases and assumptions, and flaws in our logic or methods, we solicited feedback from others, i.e., discussed with colleagues the study process, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations.

Participants

The four participants were first-year international doctoral students at Shaanxi Normal University, originating from Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia and Ghana. At the time of data collection, three of them were residing in their home countries and had never entered China, while one student had returned home after a semester on campus. All had followed their programmes entirely online.

Limitations

Like most small-scale qualitative studies, this research has several limitations that should be borne in mind when interpreting its findings. First, the small and relatively homogeneous sample limits the transferability of the results. Second, the interviewee experienced difficulties expressing themselves in English, which may have constrained the depth of some responses. Third, despite efforts to recruit participants with diverse characteristics, we encountered challenges with internet connectivity and time differences, as all participants were working and had limited free time. We partly addressed this by scheduling interviews on weekends, and some interviewees actively sought better internet access. Nevertheless, these factors may have influenced who could participate and how comfortable they felt during the interviews.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS TARGETED AT STUDENTS OUTSIDE CHINA

We conducted and interpreted interviewees' responses using the Interview Instruments to explore how international students at Chinese universities were studying both inside and outside China during COVID-19 and to describe their social, emotional, and learning experiences, challenges, and difficulties, and how they coped with them. The situation of students outside and inside China will be demonstrated separately. However, the students' situations outside China will be primarily considered, as they are significant representatives.

Experiences of Chinese universities' international students outside China

We used the following tool to answer the first research question about current international students' educational, social, and emotional experiences:

Table 1. Research and interview questions related to the current situation of Social, Emotional, and Learning experience

Research question	SEL characteristic	Key	Interview Question
How do international students of Chinese universities studying outside of China during COVID-19 describe their educational, social, and emotional experiences?	Self-awareness		2. How can you describe your life outside of China?
	Self-management		
	Self-awareness		3. How can you describe your online education?
	Relationship-skills		
	Self-awareness		4. How do you feel during your recent education experiences?
	Self-management		
	Responsible decision making		
	Self-awareness		5. What are three emotions that could describe your current education experiences
	Self-management		
	Responsible decision making		
	Responsible decision-making		6. Has your goal of getting an education changed after you found that you will study online?
	\Self-management		

*** Social experience.** Four respondents described life outside China as challenging, as staying abroad and studying online were difficult due to slow internet connections. At the same time, a few respondents had permanent jobs at the time of the interview. One of the interviewees mentioned that he had to look for a job because he had returned to Ghana a few months before the interview. Furthermore, all PhD students were constrained by the difficulties they faced with the mandatory online class attendance. Thus, in such a non-standard situation, students assess the problems that have arisen and show stress management skills, perseverance, and motivation, in the absence of which it would be impossible to continue their education. Only one student mentioned that he enjoys life outside China. However, he mentioned problems that we will discuss below.

*** Emotional experience.** By analysing the interviewees' feelings during online classes, we extracted and defined emotions of different valences, ranging from fear to satisfaction and excitement. It must be emphasised that all

students experienced polar emotions, for example, happiness and fear or satisfaction and anxiety. Thus, we have identified the following emotions experienced by interviewees:

- negative valence emotions: uncertainty, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness,
- positive valence emotions: satisfaction, happiness, excitement.

The student feels uncertain because of the decision to leave China and return to his motherland.

“Even today, I asked about it. When will I return? Can I complete my course?”

Interviewees described their fear and mentioned the following reasons: “I cannot be awarded a certificate because I am not in China”, and “I could not understand the professor and peers.” Both reasons relate to successful education performance and the possibility of not completing a PhD course. In this situation, it can be said that one of the interviewed students understands self-responsibility for the decision he has made in the past, but negative thoughts still haunt him. In this context, it is not easy to control one's inner thoughts and state, but self-regulation and self-management, inherent in adults, should help balance one's state. Thus, we traced the connections among self-awareness, decision-making responsibility, and self-management.

Students describe their anxiety experienced at the time of the interview for various reasons, such as “time difference,” “educational performance quality,” and “impossibility to get feedback from the professors because of the lesson time limit.” The answer was negative when we asked and clarified whether they had any negative emotions unrelated to online lessons. Almost all interviewees experience stress from organising their time to attend online classes and delivering excellent performances.

Negative emotions such as anger and sadness were caused by the “current situation is not under control” and “because of the problems in online education.” An adequate assessment of the current situation and the inability to change a student's condition naturally elicits negative emotions, but this again emphasises the presence of interviewees with such SEL Key characteristics as self-awareness and self-management. Impulse control, stress management, perseverance, goal setting, and motivation are defining traits.

When discussing the positive emotions of the interviewees, we need to emphasise the happiness and excitement they feel while taking online courses. For example, one of the interviewees underlines the reason for joy as:

“I am enrolled as a PhD student at Shanxi Normal University and would like to be an independent researcher by the end of my PhD studies.”

Another interviewee said she felt happy because she “wanted to get the scholarship and was successful.” Furthermore, the third interviewee says that she was excited “to have online classes and can spend more time with family.” Another positive emotion highlighted during the interview is satisfaction from “academic performance because (...) trying to give my hundred per cent to learn as much as possible.” Thus, all students emphasise that today's positive emotions mainly relate to receiving a scholarship or doing their PhD course. Undoubtedly, the motivation stems from satisfaction with their achievements, which help students maintain emotional balance and continue their PhD courses online. Some students might give up or freeze the semester without a strong, positive emotional backdrop.

Thus, speaking about their social and educational experience, all interviewees mentioned that it is tough to be abroad now; they find it hard to get a good Internet connection, and they have to find a way out of problematic situations every time. Many of them are at a loss, which causes negative emotions such as uncertainty, fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness; despite this, positive emotions (satisfaction, happiness, excitement) fully compensate and balance the internal state. Speaking about social problems, it is worth emphasising that students encounter difficulties communicating with their groupmates and professors; the main issues are a low level of English, limited lesson time, and the impossibility of communicating offline. At the same time, all students emphasised that being at home with their families provides them with support from relatives, friends, and colleagues, which helps them maintain high motivation and morale. Therefore, students are negatively affected by studying abroad

and taking online courses. However, despite taking responsibility for the decision to continue their education at the university, as well as agreeing to study online, they will help the interviewees look for solutions to problems through cooperation with students and professors, recognising and using their strengths, as well as understanding the weaknesses that the interviewees try to make stronger.

*** Learning experience.** When discussing how students see and perceive their learning at the time of the interview, it should be noted that the significant problem is the Internet connection, as the quality of the knowledge acquired depends on a strong connection. It is worth noting that online learning limits the acquisition of general knowledge and the exchange of experiences among students and professors. The interviewees mentioned the lack of communication between students and classmates.

“cannot discuss (...) with our teachers or maybe with my peers.” and “it is not enough interaction with my teachers and peers.”

It is impossible to fully relax and immerse in the discussion if groupmates and lecturers cannot see each other. One of the students also mentioned that he could not access the online library to read the literature and download the articles and books needed for his scientific research. In this case, we would like to emphasise that the skills of relationship and self-management came to the fore, as the student found a way out of the situation and was able to reach an agreement with his classmates and supervisor to help him download the necessary data and send it by email.

Another difficulty some of the interviewed students face is understanding English. Because all students and professors are non-native English speakers, there are a few misunderstandings during the lessons: “have difficulties understanding the professor” and “it is hard to understand the concept.” Nevertheless, this self-management skill demonstrates a high level of motivation and self-awareness, as she focused on her weak spot, found a way to address the problem, and completed a PhD course.

When asked whether the interviewees had changed their primary goal after learning they would have to take their PhD course online, all students answered that it does not matter how the course will go, as they are ready to make the maximum effort to achieve the final goal. In the modern world, information technology is advancing, helping adapt the educational process to an online learning system as quickly as possible.

International students’ educational, social, and emotional challenges

We used four interview questions to identify the educational, social, and emotional challenges students face when studying outside of China.

Table 2. Research and interview questions related to the problems faced by students

Research question	SEL Key characteristic	Interview Question
2. What educational, social, and emotional challenges do they face?	Self-management	What problems do you meet during online education nowadays?
	Social awareness	
	Relationship skills	
	Self-awareness	What is the most challenging in your learning?
	Relationship skills	
	Self-management	What is the most challenging in your social life?
	Relationship skills	

	Self-awareness Self-management	What is the most challenging in your emotional condition?
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*** Challenges correspond to students' social life.**

Analysing what was the most challenging in a social student's life, the following problems can be defined:

- the lack of social activities ("we cannot interact with people around as we could interact before COVID-19");
- social pressure due to getting a doctoral degree at the time of the interview ("friends and family members ask me many questions about the Chinese language, but I do not know anything about the Chinese language");
- long teacher's response time ("I send a message to my teacher, it takes 4 or 5 days to reply).

Only one interviewee claimed that she does not have any social challenges.

*** Challenges connected with the emotional condition.** As students described the emotional challenges, they illuminated the existing contradictions. For example, for someone, their emotional challenges are not critical because they are staying at home, and it makes any other problems not severe:

"I feel good because home is a sweet home."

Nevertheless, the remaining interviewees' emotional challenges are complex. The student from Pakistan claimed that she feels "a hundred per cent is social and emotional loneliness." The students from Indonesia and Russia mentioned the social pressure:

"from people, because people think if someone has a doctorate, then this person is perfect in knowledge in all fields of science"

and performance self-expectation pressure:

"I was in a big press because of the difference between Russian international standards, so my emotional condition was not good."

To understand how students cope with these educational, social, and emotional challenges, we used four interview questions, along with one additional question to determine what students would like to improve in online education at the university.

One of SEL's Key characteristics is relationship skills and social awareness, but because of COVID-19, students cannot communicate with each other, cannot have a cup of tea when they are free, and discuss the project or the lesson materials. Moreover, students also struggle because of social loneliness, which can lead to deep depression. Human minds and bodies respond to stress, with consequences that can affect our health, well-being, and learning. The current COVID-19 pandemic only adds to the negative pressure(Rosanbalm, 2021). Although the stress response has the potential to impact students' learning, students from high-stress and unstable homes are at the most significant risk. Although the stress response can affect the education of all students, those who live in environments with higher levels of stress and instability, **including students in low- and middle-income or resource-constrained countries**, are most at risk. J. P. Shonkoff (2011) and Bessel A. van der Kolk (2005) claimed that the neurochemical responses of an unregulated stress-response system could gradually become toxic to neural tissue in different areas of the brain. These structural and functional changes in the brain can result in long-term deficits in memory, attention, mood, decision-making, and impulse control. On the other hand, being in warm and positive relationships at home and with colleagues at work, the student will begin to feel supported and try to compensate for negative emotions by finding solutions to emerging problems related to online lessons, lack of data, and independently establishing communication with their groupmates using relationship and self-government skills.

* Challenges in getting an education.

The main problems interviewees face during online education

“Are emotional and psychological aspects of it Intense in answering questions?”

Other additional problems are “cannot access University Library,” “classes are usually overlapped with the work time during the workday,” “the connection problem,” and “lack of the chance to ask the teacher a question in person.”

Interviewees considered that the most challenging aspect for all students in learning is “the language barrier.” One of the students confirmed that “the foreign language is challenging and soon must learn Chinese as well.” Another student confirmed that the main barrier is that “English is the second language for all students and teachers.” One of the interviewees emphasised the obligation to “learn how to do research by following the international standards,” which made her feel stressed and under pressure. Self-efficacy is a manifestation of the critical characteristic of SEL as self-awareness, illuminated in the context of the situation, which is associated with self-organisation, which appears as stress management, self-motivation, goal setting, and the manifestation of organisational skills. We should also consider the problems mentioned by all students in answer to almost every question: “the internet connection” and “lack of interaction with peers in the current situation.” Thus, students highlighted their need to communicate, engage in university social life, and be part of teamwork.

Ways of solving social, emotional, and learning problems

This part is described around the following:

Table 3. Research and interview questions related to the solving problems abilities

Research question	SEL Key characteristic	Interview Question
How do students cope with these challenges?	Social awareness	11. Do you think you are good at problem-solving?
	Responsible decision-making	
	Self-awareness	12. How do you deal with problems in your social life?
	Self-management	
	Relationship skills	
	Responsible decision-making	13. How do you deal with problems in your emotional condition
	Self-awareness	
	Self-management	
	Relationship skills	
	Responsible decision making	
	Social awareness	14. After you meet problems in learning during online education, how do you solve them?
	Self-awareness	
	Self-management	

	Responsible decision making Relationship skills	
	Self-awareness Self-management Social awareness	15. Anything you want to advise or suggestions from the teachers and university administration?

When interviewees were asked about their problem-solving abilities, they all claimed they were good at it. The extracted problems were sorted and combined with the ways to solve them.

Table 4. Social, Emotional, and Learning problems and proposed ways of solution

Problem area	Sub-problems	SEL key characteristic	Students` view of solutions
Social life problems	the lack of social activities	Self-awareness Self-management Relationship skills	"Whenever we feel sad, we always plan parties or get together with friends and family."
	social pressure due to getting a doctoral degree at the time of the interview	Self-management Responsible decision making	"read and study more to show my abilities to others."
	long teacher's response time	Lack of opportunities to improve social awareness Lack of opportunities to use relationship skills	"needs just accept the current situation," "there is no better solution than offline starting, we can talk to the professor personally and discuss things together."
Emotional condition problems	social and emotional loneliness	Self-awareness Self-management Relationship skills Responsible decision making	"try to communicate more and meet with people around."
	social pressure	Self-awareness Self-management Social awareness Responsible decision making	"needs to learn about it and find the answer to people's questions."

	performance self- expectation pressure	Self-awareness Self-management Responsible decision making	"So nowadays, and more relaxed because I know that step by step, I can get the main goal and just need some time, just need to implement my knowledge into research and paper practice."
Problems in learning	the language barrier	Self-awareness Self-management Responsible decision making	"Work hard to learn English";
	the internet connection	Self-management Responsible decision making	"The best way is to prepare in advance to get internet access, "tried to get the better internet packages";
	lack of interaction with peers and teachers	Self-management Relationship skills Responsible decision making	"I had to read more by myself to compensate for the lack of communication, and also I tried to ask teachers more about the topics that I am interested in, and also I started to talk to the senior students and ask them for advice"

We unexpectedly identified one more learning barrier that students mentioned when we were talking about the educational experience:

Lack of scientific platforms. The solution regarding interviewees' opinions is to "give access to the University Library so it will help us and get better results."

Learning academic skills and content requires SEL skills. To achieve academic success, one must manage impulses and emotions, focus attention, follow classroom rules, and persevere in complex tasks. It also helps to get along well with classmates and teachers. In finding solutions to these problems, students were engaged in introspection, identified their emotional needs for self-realisation, and had an accurate self-perception. Relying on the results of internal reflection and self-assessment in the current situation, students correlate their internal impulses and stress, which helps them determine ways to solve the problem and set new goals in all areas of life, including learning. The solution to the problem of teachers' lengthy responses to students' questions has yet to be discovered. The students offered to simply put up with the current situation, as they had no opportunity to influence it. From the psychological point of view, with a polar perception, students could experience severe depression from hopelessness and impotence, reinforced by stress from the epidemiological situation in the world and the country.

When analysing the results of the proposed options for solving social life problems, the following SEL key characteristics were identified: self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The issue of a lack of social self-awareness was also highlighted, as was the need for students to develop relationship skills.

Problems of emotional state are directly related to issues in social life and in learning. In analysing the negative emotions that arose from encountering the barriers, the students demonstrated all the essential characteristics, as shown in Table 5.

The search for solutions to problems arising from online education is built on crucial characteristics, such as self-management and responsible decision-making. The interviewees offered solutions to the issues that would help to stabilise the situation as quickly and effectively as possible. Each of the interviewees stressed the need to put their energy and effort into it.

At the end of the interview, the following advice and suggestions were put forward by the students:

- Money issue

“we are scholarship students; we should get a stipend.”

- Learning process issue

“We should have face-to-face video interaction.”

“We are in our learning phase (...); we still need feedback to improve our research ability.”

“give students a chance to watch lesson-recorded videos.”

- Online course issue

“need to tell us in advance about graduation. Then, if we need to pass the HSK exam, we can be prepared.”

“organize comfortable learning from 1 to 2 hours or one hour a day. 2 or 3 classes per week. Because we have assessments and have tasks from professors.”

Requests made by students and to the school administration and teachers once again confirm the presence of fears and worries among students and their need to address the problems described above.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS TARGETED AT THE STUDENTS IN CHINA

For a more complete and in-depth analysis, we interviewed several international students on campus during the Pandemic. Some questions have been adjusted based on students' locations.

Students staying on Chinese university campuses describe their educational, social, and emotional experiences.

Speaking about the difficulties students experienced on campus during the Pandemic, it is worth noting that students from many universities in China were quarantined in their rooms and were unable to go out for an extended period. All these restrictions were adopted to ensure the safety of all students nationwide and to limit the spread of the epidemic.

After analysing interviews with students in China, we compiled the following table:

Table 5. Social, Emotional, and Learning problems faced by international students staying in China and proposed ways of solution

Students experience	Students staying in China	Students staying outside of China
Social experience	- the lack of social activities	- the lack of social activities - social pressure due to getting a doctoral degree at the time of the interview - long teacher's response time
Emotional experience	- negative valence emotions: passiveness, hopelessness, uncertainty - positive valence emotions: calmness	- negative valence emotions: uncertainty , fear, anxiety, anger, sadness - positive valence emotions: satisfaction, happiness, excitement.
Educational	- fatigue/exhaustion - disappointment - feeling of disconnection - and detachment	- the language barrier - the internet connection - the lack of interconnection with peers and teachers

* **Social experience and challenges in the education process.** Based on the table, we can conclude that, regardless of location, all students experience a lack of social communication and social activity. For example, one of the students claimed that he was not an active social person, but even he found it challenging to be alone over time:

"I do not need personal social contacts, but sometimes I just want to talk to someone, not on an educational topic."

Thus, essential SEL characteristics, such as social awareness and relationship skills, cannot be fully implemented. When analysing the described emotional experience, we found that students in China and outside of it experience positive and negative emotions. However, a significant similarity worth highlighting is the feeling of uncertainty that torments students. However, for students in China, this feeling stems from being unable to leave their rooms and thus being alone for days, weeks, or months. Such isolation is the reason for the change in the time of biological activity, as a result of which many interviewees had difficulties in organising daily routines:

"my biological rhythms have changed." And

"I belong to myself and cannot enter into a permanent mode of work, sleep, and rest."

As well as physical activity decreasing:

"laziness of the body breeds laziness of thoughts."

"although I have much more time and am constantly in my room, I cannot force myself to study hard."

This problem overlaps with the performance self-expectation pressure problem discussed above in the discussion section on students' results from outside China.

* **Emotional experience and challenges connected with emotional condition.** It is worth noting that when asked about changing the format of education during the transition to online, students did not experience negative

emotions and felt quite comfortable and calm, having the opportunity to continue studying in their rooms and to devote their free time to reading and studying. However, the interviewees also considered the ambiguity of the situation they found themselves in: with the appearance of a large amount of free time, they became hostages of constant online meetings, which, in their opinion, do not always provide much helpful information. The analysis of emotional experience showed that three of the five essential characteristics of SEL are impaired or at a sufficiently low level among students: self-management, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness. The second problem was the difficulty organising the day, which is also related to the educational experience.

*** Educational experience and challenges in the education process.** An analysis of answers about educational experience showed that all students suffer from a lack of communication, but students in China experience a feeling of disconnection and detachment:

During regular classroom lessons, we had the opportunity to interact in person and maintain live communication and contact. I miss this."

Lack of face-to-face communication in and out of class negatively affects all SEL key characteristics, especially self-management and relationship skills.

Thus, speaking about their social, emotional, and educational experiences, we can conclude that, regardless of their location, students faced the same experiences that negatively affected their SEL key characteristics, which are the foundation of successful and productive studying at the university. After all, there is no point in denying that students quarantined on campus are more isolated than those at home with their families. However, despite the negative emotions students experience at home, they can always count on the support of family and friends, which helps them find balance and not lose heart. At the same time, students on campus go through a period of life when passivity and hopelessness consume them, causing fatigue and frustration.

Ways of Solving Social, Emotional, and Learning problems proposed by students staying in China.

According to the suggestions received from international students on how to solve the existing problems, we have compiled the following table:

Table 6. Social, Emotional, and Learning problems faced by international students staying outside of China and proposed ways of solution

Problem area	Sub-problems	Students` view of solutions
Social life problems	the lack of social activities	seeking contact with remaining students on campus to meet social needs
Emotional condition problems	difficulties in organizing daily routine	"I am trying to schedule a day."
	passivity	"All we have to do is accept the situation and wait"
	decreased physical activity	"I try to do exercises at home, but usually feel lazy"
Problems in learning	fatigue/exhaustion	"sometimes, during meetings where I do not need to take an active part, I can do my own thing in parallel"
	disappointment	"I try to take an active part in discussions whenever possible."
	the feeling of disconnection and detachment	students did not find a suitable solution until the end of the Pandemic and the removal of restrictions

As shown in the table, the proposed solution to the social problems faced by students on campus does not differ from those in other countries. All students are trying to find a way to compensate for the lack of personal social interaction. However, what attracts attention are the proposals for solutions, and even the lack of options for addressing emotional problems. For example, the students could not find an answer to the question related to the feeling of “passivity” and suggested, “accept the situation and wait.” At the same time, students once again mention that it is challenging to implement the proposed options for solving problems, even though the solution to the problem itself can be found and modelled:

“I am trying to schedule a day,” and “I try to do exercises at home, but usually feel lazy.”

Thus, we can once again conclude that although students in China can set a goal, they cannot control what they have accumulated over a long period. Therefore, SEL skills such as self-management and responsible decision-making, which are necessary for successful learning, cannot be fully applied. Moreover, the emotional component is the basis of any human activity, especially for a student. If a student is in a low mood, their performance and internal motivation will also be low. Turning to possible solutions to the problems of the educational process, we note that the interviewees were generally more positive and showed more enthusiasm in implementing solutions:

“I try to take an active part in discussions whenever possible.”

However, such a problem as disconnection and detachment remains without any solution other than “accept the situation and wait.” On the one hand, we can say that this decision is passive and negative, but we can assume that the interviewees understand the dangers of the Pandemic and its consequences. Hence, they offer this decision as the only correct one.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research both align with and add nuance to existing scholarship on international students during the COVID-19 period. Similar to earlier studies that point to increased stress, loneliness and disruption of academic trajectories among mobile student populations (Pham & Shi, 2020; Sampogna et al., 2021; Supiani et al., 2020; Xu, 2021), the participants in this project described a mixture of reduced everyday contact with others, uncertainty about their academic futures, and strong pressure to achieve high academic standards. Importantly, their narratives show that these issues do not appear as separate problems: social, emotional and learning-related difficulties are closely interwoven in doctoral students’ experiences and are difficult to disentangle in practice.

Considering the material through the SEL framework helps to illuminate the ways in which students activated, and at times struggled to activate, key social and emotional competencies. Self-awareness and self-management could be seen in their attempts to notice and name negative emotions, manage stress and sustain motivation despite unstable internet connections and limited feedback from instructors (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Decisions about how to distribute time between work and study, whether to take on employment, and how to organise daily routines reflected elements of responsible decision-making. At the same time, the data indicate that these competencies are not purely individual attributes; they are shaped and constrained by institutional conditions such as pedagogical approaches, communication patterns and the availability of support services (CASEL Guide Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, 2012; Zins & Elias, 2006).

A comparison of students’ accounts residing outside China with those who remained on Chinese campuses reveals a pattern of both convergence and divergence. Across both groups, participants spoke about the lack of informal social activities, feelings of isolation and a wish for more direct contact with supervisors and teachers. Students who were abroad also reported difficulties related to unstable or expensive internet, time zone differences, and restricted access to libraries and other academic resources. In contrast, students on campus more often highlighted tiredness, disrupted daily rhythms, and a sense of detachment linked to prolonged periods spent in their rooms. These contrasts point to the need to take both geographical location and infrastructural conditions into serious consideration when planning support for international doctoral students (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Taken together, the results suggest that institutional responses to crisis situations should not be limited to ensuring the technical feasibility of online teaching. If social, emotional and learning aspects of students' lives are as interdependent as the SEL framework proposes, then adjustments to assessment formats or digital platforms need to be complemented by deliberate efforts to strengthen interpersonal connections, provide regular and timely feedback, and create opportunities for emotional expression and peer support (Durlak et al., 2011; Sampogna et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

According to Lawor and Rosanbalm (2016; 2021), SEL encompasses the processes by which people acquire and apply the knowledge and skills needed to identify and manage their emotions; set and achieve goals; make responsible decisions; develop and maintain positive relationships, and understand others' points of view and show empathy for others. The COVID-19 Pandemic has introduced new stressors while removing comforting connections and routines from the lives of children, teens, and adults. Aside from the many students who have lost loved ones to the virus, others may be concerned about their health and safety, social isolation, or learning remotely. As unemployment rises, they may be worried about food insecurity or stable housing. They may bear an additional burden of anxiety amid an increasingly tumultuous racial and political environment. They miss countless cherished events and activities with families, friends, classmates, and teammates. All this ongoing stress and loss will predictably affect mental health, social connections, and emotional well-being. Indeed, economic downturns are linked to increased mental health difficulties for youth, likely due to household stress and adult mental health (Golberstein et al., 2019).

All interviewed international students of Chinese universities, regardless of location, found themselves in challenging social, emotional, and educational situations during COVID-19, such as

- lack of social connections;
- the presence of anxiety, fear, and intense pressure from friends, relatives, and the general environment in the world;
- the presence of slow feedback and the lack of timely responses from classmates and professors;
- the difficulties in building their identification in the virtual space by graduate students who are concerned about problems with the Internet.

Speaking about the social experience and social problems, students noted the lack of communication with their classmates and professors, as well as social pressure from others associated with high expectations. However, despite the negative emotional strain and stress students experience from outside China and from studying remotely, the home environment, family, and friends are supportive, helping them cope with problems with confidence, even though their ability to communicate freely is limited due to COVID-19.

The Pandemic that has unfolded worldwide since 2020 has brought new learning technologies and modernised education worldwide. However, when analysing the technological capabilities of interviewed students, it is worth noting that some countries face significant challenges in adapting to such rapid modernisation. The main difficulties with the transition to online learning are related to Internet connectivity issues, limited lesson time, the inability to communicate with classmates and teachers who live a long way away, and limited periods of electricity supply. Thus, students end up in a less effective learning environment, which is a wake-up call for universities. Despite the difficulties, all students remained optimistic about their learning. Moreover, they tried to overcome the challenges and strive to achieve what they believed in.

Despite the severe problems students encountered during online learning and the need to work and study at the same time, the interviewees identified not only negative valence emotions (uncertainty, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness) but also positive valence emotions (satisfaction, happiness, excitement). Positive emotions always have a positive effect on a person's overall emotional state, which, in turn, is directly related to self-confidence and high motivation. Furthermore, all positive emotions are associated with the positive educational experience

during the training and with the support of an intimate family environment. Such compensation helps students cope with internal experiences and fears and affects learning effectiveness.

It should be noted that all difficulties and stresses are subject to an internal analysis by the respondents, which helps quickly and effectively identify ways to overcome barriers. The confidence and high motivation of all interviewees, despite the complexity of students' situation during this time, are directly related to learning outcomes and efficiency.

Comparing interview results from doctoral students who have been living outside China suggests that they also experience the same emotions despite different life situations. However, despite the difficulties doctoral students staying abroad have encountered, they remain highly motivated to learn and continue studying hard, although their intrinsic motivation to act is low. Furthermore, the need for social contact is also very high, and the ways to solve it remain unchanged; only the context changes. Thus, we can conclude that all students, regardless of location, experience similar emotions during a pandemic, encounter the same problems, and seek ways to solve them. If, however, the solution to the problem is to wait for the stabilisation of the epidemiological situation for an indefinite period, then students accept the complexity of the current situation and try to fulfil all restrictions responsibly.

Even though students can already return to China, many continue to study online. Because of the sheer number of challenges, students must put in a considerable amount of personal effort and push themselves to the limit and maybe beyond their limits. From our point of view, they need support from the university and teachers to help students make up for lost opportunities by organising individual and additional activities. Doctoral students should be allowed to network in groups and catch up on academic and emotional issues. Universities should also organise additional support services and practical guidance to help graduate students quickly adapt and integrate into the university environment in China. With this extra support, students can easily continue their academic life after the Pandemic.

All three types of experience we emphasised in our study are of exceptional importance and strongly influence students' ability to utilise the internal potential required to complete their studies. Thus, the connection between emotional, social, and academic experiences is undeniable and warrants further study in a new and irreversible reality.

Taken together, these findings point to several implications for policy and practice. Universities highlight the need to treat international doctoral students as a distinct group whose academic success depends on robust digital infrastructure and sustained social and emotional support. For supervisors and teachers, they point to the value of regular, predictable communication, explicit feedback, and attention to students' well-being alongside academic progress. For future research, the study suggests the importance of larger, multi-site, and longitudinal designs that can capture variation across institutions and countries, as well as mixed-methods approaches that combine in-depth qualitative accounts with broader survey data. Such work would deepen understanding of how social, emotional, and learning experiences interact over time and how SEL-informed interventions might strengthen international doctoral students' resilience and academic outcomes in times of crisis and beyond.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research with human participants at Shaanxi Normal University. Before each interview, participants were informed about the aims of the study, the interview procedures, potential risks and benefits, and how their data would be protected. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, pseudonyms were used in all reports, and audio files and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research and authorship of this study.

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