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Geopolitical Uncertainties and Academic Burnout among Students in Sino-foreign Cooperative Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract. Under geopolitical instability, international higher education faces greater risk. Students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs are under both cross-cultural and academic pressure. This article reviews studies on burnout, stress transmission, and intervention measures, and proposes a "vulnerability-uncertainty-burnout" (VUB) framework for this group. The framework argues that students in jointly-run programs between China and abroad are especially vulnerable because of concerns about program sustainability, bilingual norms, and cross-border career expectations.By bringing together regulatory and chain-mediated evidence, this article outlines a path through which stress is transmitted. Geopolitical uncertainty appears to trigger anticipatory anxiety, which then weakens academic self-awareness and motivation over time. The pattern is fairly clear. A critical review of existing interventions suggests that some measures can reduce pressure under geopolitical conditions, but their effects remain uneven and some uncertainties still remain. Among current approaches to reducing academic burnout, helping students build the ability to deal with uncertainty seems especially important. This review also offers theoretical guidance for mental health education in international joint universities.

Keywords: geopolitical uncertainty, Sino-foreign cooperative education, academic burnout, chain mediation, psychological intervention

1. Introduction

As global education becomes more international, higher education has increasingly become one arena of international competition [1, 2]. As of 2023, Sino-foreign cooperative education programs in China include over 2,300 joint programs and have produced over two million graduates. The academic development paths of these graduates appear to depend largely on the bilateral relationship [3]. This matters directly. Unlike traditional majors, Sino-foreign joint degree programs depend on overseas resources, overseas certifications, and cross-border channels. Because of this structure, their stability is highly sensitive to changes in international relations [4].

The existing literature falls into two fairly separate lines of research. One looks at changes in geopolitical patterns and cross-border education, but most of this work stays at the macro level [2]. The other examines student burnout, with more attention to internal pressure and cultural

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adjustment. External geopolitical shocks are mostly left out in these studies [5] [6].Few studies have clearly traced how geopolitical instability may lead to perceived stress and then to academic burnout [7]. Recent research suggests that geopolitical discourse can become a lasting psychological and social stressor [8, 9]. Even so, this issue is rarely examined from the perspective of the Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) group.

This review centers on three research questions: (1) How does the vulnerability of students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs differ from that of domestic undergraduate students? (2) What mechanism links geopolitical uncertainty with academic burnout among Sino-foreign cooperative students? (3) Which intervention strategies most effectively address uncontrollable geopolitical stressors? In response to these questions, the review sets out a "vulnerability-uncertainty-burnout" (VUB) transmission framework and considers possible ways to manage uncertainty. The paper aims to offer theoretical guidance for international higher education and for analyzing and regulating academic burnout among Sino-foreign cooperative students.

2. Geopolitical restructuring of transnational higher education

2.1. Definition of TNHE and global development trajectory

International higher education refers to a form of educational provision in which students earn academic qualifications through programs offered by foreign institutions while remaining in their home country. Its rapid growth took place during a period of relatively stable global geopolitics [2]. However, geopolitical instability has put increasing pressure on international higher education. At present, China has a large international higher education ecosystem and has cooperated with 38 countries so far [3]. For learners who study under these agreements, the situation is different from that of short-term exchange students. They need to make long-term plans around continuing bilateral treaties with other countries, so changes in international relations affect them more directly [4].

2.2. Higher education as a site of geopolitical disputes

Scholars have conceptualized higher education as a geopolitical domain [3]. Universities are political institutions shaped by overlapping power relations. They distribute resources, but they can also become sites of resistance [1]. Geopolitical shifts affect institutional agreements and can reach into classroom discussion [2]. In this sense, geopolitical discourse operates as a persistent stressor [8].For most students, this discourse stays relatively abstract. That is not always the case. For students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs, diplomatic tensions can turn into direct risks. These may include suspended academic exchanges, limits on internships, and disputes over degree accreditation [4].

2.3. Different perspectives on geopolitical pressures

There is still clear disagreement over whether geopolitical change causes a broadly similar stress response across the population, or whether this response is stronger in particular sub-groups. Torales et al. [8] argue that threat-focused narratives can cause substantial distress in the general population, which suggests a relatively shared vulnerability when geopolitical conditions shift. Lai and Jung, by contrast, argue that students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs face stronger geopolitical effects because they are exposed to more direct changes and risks [4]. For this group, geopolitical uncertainty appears more likely to produce anxiety than it does for domestic student groups.The

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difference between these views may come from something earlier explanations do not fully address. They tend to pay less attention to the built-in risks of Sino-foreign cooperative programs themselves. These include decrease in value of degrees and unstable cooperation. In this context, geopolitical tension is no longer just an abstract external issue. It becomes tied to students' own academic plans and future prospects. Geopolitical anxiety, then, may be neither fully universal nor entirely individualized. Its intensity depend on how far geopolitical shifts affect learners' academic prospects.

3. Definition of academic burnout and its psychological related factors

3.1. Three-dimensional core structure of academic burnout

The burnout theory came from occupational psychology. At first, it described emotional exhaustion among service professionals, including fatigue, negative attitude and decrease of efficacy [10]. Later, scholars applied the concept to students as well. Because academic work shares several structural features with formal employment, especially goal-oriented tasks, regular evaluations, and sustained resource investment [10], academic burnout is usually defined through three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (chronic psychological fatigue), academic cynicism (negative attitude towards learning), and reduced self-efficacy [5]. It is a long-term condition. Unlike transient anxiety, burnout points to a more chronic form of psychological erosion that can weaken students' engagement in learning.

3.2. Personal psychological predictive factors and moderating factors

Quantitative studies found a negative correlation between academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and the severity of burnout [5]. In other words, students who saw themselves as well prepared appeared better able to cope with burnout. Those who lost confidence more easily were more likely to fall into a cycle of avoidance [5].Jin et al. constructed a chain mediation model showing that external pressure could damage students' academic self-concept, reduce their involvement, and then increase burnout level [11]. Emotion regulation also seems to buffer these effects. Adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal may help limit the spillover effect of anxiety, whereas maladaptive strategies such as rumination or suppression can leave students more exhausted and negative [6]. Together, these variables form the main moderating factors in the mechanisms underlying the VUB pathway.

4. Geopolitical rhetoric as a long-term psychological stressor

4.1. Conceptual distinction between geopolitical anxiety and targeted threat

Most traditional theories of international relations focus on specific threats that trigger panic and anxiety among nations, but they often miss the more diffuse anxiety linked to global geopolitical uncertainty [9]. One study found that people can still feel fear when facing things they understand, even if they cannot clearly explain why that anxiety occurs [9]. Geopolitical anxiety refers to people's concerns about unstable future situations that cannot be easily measured. More precisely, anxiety is better understood here as a chronic psychological and social stressor rather than an acute trauma [8]. Risk-laden information keeps circulating. Over time, this can build up psychological strain in people's minds [8]. Torales et al. pointed out five psychological paths leading to anxiety:

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activation of symbolic threats, intolerance of uncertainty, amplification effect of the media, cross-contextual distress overflow, and vulnerability at the hierarchical level [8].

4.2. Impact on students in sino-foreign cooperative programs

For many undergraduate students, diplomatic tensions feel distant and abstract. For students jointly run by both China and other countries, though, shifts in international relations can create direct risks [4]. Symbolic threats appear in worries that their qualifications may lose value and that career plans may be blocked [8]. Because academic progress depends partly on external conditions they cannot control, uncertainty tends to feel even harder to manage. This differs from ordinary academic stress, where personal effort can often ease the pressure. Geopolitical risks do not work that way. As a result, traditional burnout research does not fully address this particular form of anxiety.

5. The unique vulnerabilities faced by students of joint programs

5.1. Complex and potentially conflicting academic and cross-cultural pressures

The curriculum of joint programs follows a demanding dual structure. Students have to adjust at the same time to foreign teaching methods and local norms, while also dealing with language barriers and difficulties in cultural adaptation [12]. That combination can increase anxiety. Geopolitical pressures may further weaken students' ability to cope [12].

5.2. Program unsustainability as the core differentiating vulnerability

The most basic difference between TNHE students and ordinary undergraduates is that they are more exposed to program instability caused by worsening geopolitics [4]. When bilateral relations deteriorate, agreements may be suspended, overseas semesters cancelled, or credit policies changed. In joint programs, students may have to keep wondering whether the program will remain stable. That uncertainty can turn into ongoing anticipatory anxiety and a lasting source of stress [4]. This is the central premise of the VUB model.

6. The transmission mechanisms from geopolitical uncertainty to academic burnout

6.1. Partial mediation of chronic anxiety

External shocks alone do not directly cause burnout. The link appears to depend on persistent anxiety as a mediating factor [13]. When students face ongoing threats, they tend to remain in a state of hypervigilance. Much of their energy is then directed toward anxiety rather than study [8]. This matters. As that pattern continues, cognitive capacity may gradually decline, and emotional exhaustion can follow [10].Compared with academic pressure, geopolitical anxiety seems harder to control. Students can often respond to academic demands by putting in more effort themselves. Bilateral relations are different. They lie outside students' control, and this reduced sense of control appears to increase procrastination and speed up burnout [9].

6.2. Chain mediation through academic self-concept and regulators

The chain framework proposed by Jin et al. explains sequential erosion [11]. Ongoing uncertainty weakens academic self-concept. When students worry that their qualifications are no longer enough,

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they become less confident about their competitiveness, and this lowers their motivation to learn. From there, concern can develop into academic cynicism and lower self-efficacy [11].Two regulatory factors affect how strongly this process is transmitted [6, 13]. Academic self-efficacy can reduce negative spillover effects, but these effects appear stronger when self-efficacy is low [13]. Emotional regulation also matters between anxiety and burnout. Students who use adaptive regulation strategies are less likely to move from anxiety to burnout, whereas those who rely on suppression are more likely to experience faster academic burnout [6].

7. An evidence-based intervention framework centered on uncertainty resilience

7.1. Individual-level cognitive and emotional regulation training

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness training are widely regarded as two of the main individual interventions [6, 14]. By learning CBT, students can assess risks that are no longer within their control. This helps them separate systemic fluctuations from their own academic tendencies and reduce repeated thoughts about failure [15]. Mindfulness training, in turn, can lessen sustained hypervigilance triggered by geopolitical narratives. It may also reduce chronic fatigue by interrupting recurring worry loops [14]. Strengthening students' self-concept is another direct intervention drawn from the chain path model proposed by Jin et al. [11]. As an additional measure, proper physical exercise may also support the intervention process [14].

7.2. Comparison of different intervention modalities

Intervention modalities differ in both format and effectiveness. Messina et al. proposed an online group counseling program [15], built around psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, and social support delivered through a digital platform [15]. Tang et al., by contrast, conducted a meta-analysis showing that face-to-face intervention had a significantly stronger effect than interventions based on electronic devices [14]. The difference appears to be linked to richer non-verbal cues, stronger group cohesion, and fewer disruptions caused by technology.

The results suggest that the effectiveness of these methods depends on context. Messina's research project, for example, focused on people who could not communicate face to face, but its main aim was accessibility rather than treatment intensity. Tang's meta-analysis reviewed studies carried out in standard settings where on-site visits were possible. In the case of cross-border restrictions and the dispersed distribution of students in the joint education program, however, online counseling appears harder to scale.In on-campus settings, face-to-face counseling still has clear advantages. The two intervention modalities therefore differ in effectiveness across contexts.

7.3. University-level targeted support and intervention measures

Universities are where most students spend their daily lives, so campus support systems can reduce psychological distress linked to external pressures [12]. When schools give regular and clear briefings about program changes, students know what is happening and face less uncertainty. That matters. Cross-cultural adaptation programs can also reduce acculturative stress and help students cope better psychologically [12].Some universities have also set up monitoring mechanisms to identify early signs of burnout in high-risk groups, which allows staff to respond before the problem becomes more serious. In practice, several institutions use a mix of approaches rather than relying on one measure alone, including individual training, group counseling, and transparent

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communication [14]. Taken together, these approaches suggest practical ways universities may help students reduce academic burnout related to geopolitical uncertainty.

8. Conclusion

Amid ongoing geopolitical change, Sino-foreign cooperative education now operates in a less stable bilateral setting. Students in joint programs therefore face pressure from two directions: academic demands and worry about whether their programs will remain stable. This article brings together geopolitical research, burnout theory, chain-mediated psychology, and meta-analysis of intervention measures to build the VUB framework.Within this framework, geopolitical discourse is treated as a chronic stressor that students cannot control. For those in cooperative programs, it may produce anticipatory anxiety about policy shifts, institutional partnerships, or future degree recognition. That anxiety can weaken academic self-concept and reduce learning motivation. Burnout may follow.The process is not straightforward in every case, but the proposed path is clear: uncertainty linked to geopolitics affects how students judge their academic future, and those judgments shape emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Traditional interventions do not fully fit this group because the source of stress is not mainly personal or interpersonal. Individual effort alone cannot reduce geopolitical risk.For that reason, this article proposes a revised three-level system that puts resilience under conditions of uncertainty at the center. At the individual level, cognitive and emotional regulation training should be included so that students have ways to manage recurring uncertainty rather than treating it as a short-term problem. At the group level, counseling can still play a role, although service methods need adjustment when access is limited by scheduling constraints or program structure. At the institutional level, transparent internal communication matters because unclear information can intensify existing anxiety instead of reducing it.Adjunctive physical activity is also recommended. Its role here is practical: it may help regulate stress responses even when the external source of uncertainty remains unchanged.At present, existing research remains largely conceptual. Subsequent quantitative research and intervention studies should test the chain-mediated path proposed by Jin et al. [11]. Building on that basis rather than assuming uniform effects across settings; culturally adapted acceptance-based programs for uncertainty should then be developed to improve professional mental health provision for this vulnerable cohort.

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