

Life as an ethnic minority (EM) university student: Comparing mental health challenges among local and international EM students in Hong Kong

Xinyi Wang, Naubahar Sharif



Key Points

- ▶ Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study compares how the needs among local and international EM students for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are undermined in university campus life.
- ▶ The most distinct difference between the challenges that local and international EM students face lies in relatedness.
- ▶ International students report social isolation, exclusion, loneliness, homesickness, and fear of missing out, while local EM students experience more chronically and deeply rooted ethnic segregation in social networks and discrimination.
- ▶ EM university students in non-Western multicultural societies face not only prevalent stressors associated with being university students but also specific challenges that stem from a systemic lack of diversity as well as relatedness thwarting.

Photo from Getty Images

Policy Focus

University students globally face growing mental health challenges, with EM students—both local and international—particularly vulnerable. Yet, few research studies have compared their experiences or identified shared and distinct stressors, especially in non-Western contexts. This study underscores the need for tailored mental health support policies to address both shared and distinct challenges that EM students face. The study finds that enhancing campus inclusivity, through the promotion of diversity, investment in mental health resources, and

efforts to reduce isolation and discrimination, is essential to supporting their well-being.

Study Methodology

This qualitative study is nested within a larger community-based participatory study focusing on enhancing mental health among non-Chinese youth aged 15–24, including more than 13,000 participants all over Hong Kong. The study involves in-depth interviews and participant observations with 27 non-Chinese students aged 19–24 years old purposively sampled from 13 Hong Kong

universities and colleges, both government-funded and self-financed. The data collection fieldwork took place between September 2024 and May 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. To complement interview data and reduce the attitude-behaviour gap, the first author conducted ethnographic observations at the 13 campuses, engaging in students' daily lives through club meetings, classes, prayers, and canteen visits. Key insights from the observations were recorded in field notes after each fieldwork session. With participants' consent, author 1 also took field photographs to record the campus environment and facilities. All transcripts and notes were systematically coded and analysed using MAXQDA software to ensure structured and comprehensive data analysis.

Findings and Analysis

Poor Mental Health Experiences

Participants reported severe psychological distress: insomnia, loss of joy, burnout, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and self-harm thoughts or acts. Many struggled with hours of sleeplessness while still attending classes or internships, whereas spring and winter rainfall do not trigger significant productivity fluctuations.

Relatedness Thwarting

International EM Students

Endemic isolation & exclusion: Difficulty forming deep friendships with local Chinese; exclusion when Cantonese is used in groups; students from under-represented nations felt especially lonely and struggled to adjust.

Loneliness & homesickness: Strong nostalgia for home, particularly in the first year, amid Hong Kong's fast pace.

FOMO & social media addiction: First-years feared missing

social opportunities and overused social media, worsening work-life balance.

Local EM Students

Ethnic segregation: Most socialised only with other non-Chinese peers, caught between international students and local Chinese who lacked cultural awareness, creating rigid ethnic boundaries.

Overt & covert discrimination: Faced open insults (e.g., about appearance, odour, religious dress) and subtle alienation — even long-term local EMs were viewed as foreigners.

Gendered disparities: Female students had more social support and less help-seeking stigma; males isolated themselves and avoided support.

Shared Experiences

Both groups faced low cultural awareness among local Chinese, language-based exclusion, and limited campus diversity (food, activities, clubs). Halal food shortages and Chinese-dominated spaces further reduced integration.

Competence Thwarting

Common pressures included academic stress, financial strain (leading to part-time work), career/internship anxiety, Cantonese/Mandarin barriers, life-balance struggles, and graduation uncertainty.

Gendered patterns emerged: male students carried heavier academic, financial, and family pressure, sometimes turning to self-isolation or substance use. International students also faced scholarship renewal pressure amid Hong Kong's high living costs.

Participant code	Student type	Age	Ethnicity	Self-reported economic status/scholarship status
L1	Local student	24	Pakistani	Above average
L2	Local student	22	Pakistani	Average
L3	Local student	21	Pakistani	Average
L4	Local student	22	Pakistani	Below average
L5	Local student	19	Pakistani	Above average
L6	Local student	22	Pakistani	Average
L7	Local student	20	Pakistani	Below average
L8	Local student	22	Nepalese	Average
L9	Local student	22	Nepalese	Average
L10	Local student	22	Nepalese	Average
L11	Local student	25	Nepalese	Below average
L12	Local student	25	Nepalese	Below average
L13	Local student	25	Nepalese	Average
L14	Local student	24	Nepalese	Average
L15	Local student	20	Indian	Average
L16	Local student	20	Indian	Below average
L1	Local student	24	Filipino	Above average
I1	International student	23	Pakistani	I don't know/scholarship
I2	International student	19	Indonesian	I don't know/no scholarship
I3	International student	20	Indonesian	I don't know/no scholarship
I4	International student	20	Other Asian	Average/scholarship
I5	International student	21	Other Asian	Below average/scholarship
I6	International student	21	Other Asian	I don't know/scholarship
I7	International student	21	Other Asian	I don't know/scholarship
I8	International student	25	Other Asian	Above average/no scholarship
I9	International student	19	Mixed	Average/scholarship
I10	International student	20	Black/African/Caribbean	Average/scholarship

Table 1 Key study participants



Figure 1 Prayer rooms in universities in Hong Kong (photographed by Author 1 on 7 October and 13 December 2024)

Autonomy Thwarting

Both groups encountered career barriers due to strict Cantonese/Mandarin job requirements, limiting professional choice. Some switched majors to avoid language demands. Local EMs additionally faced appearance-based racism in recruitment.

Supportive Buffers

Relatedness Support

Inclusive campus clubs, cultural exchange events, university prayer rooms, religious communities, halal food options, peer mentoring, and roommate-matching programmes. NGOs also strengthened social ties, though local participation remained low and policies often short-term.

Language & Autonomy Support

Students learned Cantonese/Mandarin via university courses (often too basic) and daily practice. Some pursued language-flexible careers; international students also felt more autonomous than in their home countries.

Mental Health Support

Campus counselling, mandatory mental health courses, and wellness activities helped, but services were limited by underfunding, high demand, and cultural gaps. Stigma, privacy worries, and distrust deterred some from seeking help. Many coped via family, journaling, or breaks home; others developed harmful habits.

A model summarises SDT-based need-thwarting and -supporting factors for both student groups.

Recommendations

Develop Tailored, Group-Specific Mental Health Interventions

Universities should design and implement tailored mental health interventions that address the shared and distinct challenges faced by local and international EM students. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, institutions should conduct regular needs assessments to identify group-specific stressors, barriers to help-seeking, and cultural expectations surrounding mental health. Interventions should be culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and sensitive to students' diverse social identities.

Support Social Integration and Emotional Adjustment among International EM Students

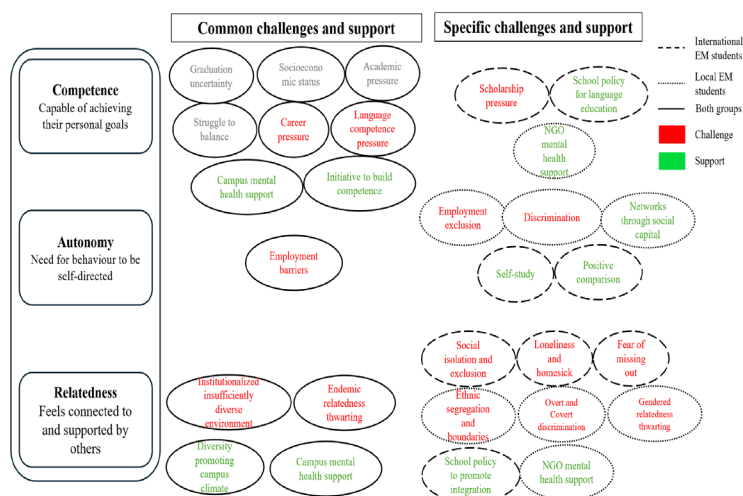


Figure 2 Common and specific need-thwarting and need-supporting experiences reported by both international and local

Programs designed for international EM students should specifically target social isolation, loneliness, homesickness, fear of missing out, and problematic social media use. Structured peer-mentorship schemes, intercultural buddy programs, and community-building activities can foster meaningful social connections and enhance students' sense of belonging. In addition, accessible self-help resources and culturally responsive cognitive-behavioural therapy can help students regulate emotions and develop healthier coping strategies. These initiatives should prioritize the strengthening of relatedness, which is central to psychological well-being, and ensure that support services are proactive rather than solely crisis-driven.

Strengthen Institutional Policies to Reduce Ethnic Segregation and Discrimination for Local EM Students

For local EM students, universities should implement reforms at the institutional and structural levels to address systemic inequities, ethnic segregation, and discrimination. This strategy should include reviews of admission practices, classroom dynamics, group project arrangements, and campus housing policies to ensure inclusive participation and equality of opportunity. Faculty and staff training in cultural competence and anti-bias education should be mandatory, promoting inclusive teaching and supervision practices. Universities should also establish transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms to address discriminatory incidents effectively. By embedding inclusion in institutional governance, policies, and everyday campus practices, higher education institutions can create environments where EM students feel respected, represented, and valued rather than marginalized.

Promote Public Education and Anti-Discrimination Campaigns

Beyond the university context, broader societal efforts are needed to combat prejudice and improve social integration. Public education campaigns should aim to enhance understanding of ethnic diversity and challenge stereotypes that mischaracterize EM and non-Chinese populations in Hong Kong. Collaboration between universities, policymakers, and community organizations can promote inclusive narratives in both campus and workplace settings. Legal and regulatory frameworks should be strengthened and consistently enforced to eliminate racial discrimination wherever possible. At the same time, awareness initiatives should encourage positive intergroup contact and mutual respect. Such multi-level strategies can foster long-term cultural change, contributing to a more inclusive and psychologically supportive social climate for EM students.

Main Reference

Xinyi, W. & Sharif, N. (2026). Life as an ethnic minority (EM) university student: Comparing mental health challenges among local and international EM students in Hong Kong. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70196>

FUNDING INFORMATION

This Public Policy Bulletin is developed under the Jockey Club Shining Together with Cross-Cultural Youth Project (Project No. 2023-CP05), funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust. The project period is from March 2024 to February 2027.



Xinyi Wang is a postdoctoral fellow at the Division of Public Policy, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, where she received her Ph.D. degree in Public Policy. Dr. Wang's interdisciplinary research interests include public health, social equity, and sustainable development.

Dr. Wang's research has been published in several peer-reviewed academic journals, including *Energy Research & Social Science*, *Energy Economics*, *Politics & Policy*, and *British Educational Research Journal*.



Naubahar Sharif heads the Department of Social Sciences and Policy Studies at The Education University of Hong Kong. Before joining EdUHK, he worked for 20 years at HKUST, leading its Public Policy Division from 2021 to 2025. His research covers Hong Kong and Greater

Bay Area innovation & STI policies, the Belt and Road Initiative, and local mental health. He has over 50 peer-reviewed publications in top Q1 journals, with his solo work featured in HKUST's 2020 and 2025 Research Assessment Exercises. He holds multiple RGC grants, led HK\$27 million mental health research projects (including HK\$14 million from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, 2021–2023), and participated in CRF and SPPR projects.

Follow Us on Social Media



Contact Us

☎ (852) 3469 2721

✉ ppolpr@ust.hk

📍 The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
c/o Division of Public Policy (PPOL)
Room 4611, Academic Building, Clear Water Bay,
Kowloon, Hong Kong

