

SUMMARY

This study explores how international students navigate their identities and participation within academic and social environments in higher education institutions in Taiwan. Conducted as part of the 2026 Taiwan Fellowship Program, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach to provide an understanding of student engagement, combining survey data from 60 international students with in-depth follow-up interviews.

The findings reveal that while participation among international students is present, it is often uneven and shaped by multiple constraints. Quantitative data indicate that only a minority of students (29.9%) feel confident participating in class discussions, while a majority report low confidence and discomfort, particularly when asking questions. A significant proportion (72.3%) expressed unease in classroom interaction, and 70.2% admitted that they often remain silent despite having ideas to share. These findings challenge the conventional assumption that silence equates to disengagement. Instead, silence emerges as a strategic and context-dependent form of participation, reflecting students' careful negotiation of linguistic, cultural, and institutional expectations.

Social participation follows a similarly complex pattern. Although 44.7% of participants reported a sense of belonging, a nearly equal proportion remained neutral, indicating partial integration rather than full inclusion. Interaction with local students was found to be limited, with only 38.2% reporting meaningful engagement. These patterns suggest that participation is not solely determined by individual motivation but is deeply influenced by external factors such as language proficiency, classroom norms, and institutional support structures.

Despite these challenges, the study highlights the agency of international students in navigating their learning environments. Through qualitative data, students describe employing various adaptive strategies, including selective participation, multilingual communication practices, and self-regulation techniques. These strategies allow them to manage their identities and participation in ways that align with both their personal comfort and contextual demands. Furthermore, the findings show that even with moderate levels of participation, students experience substantial developmental gains. An overwhelming majority (91.5%) reported significant personal growth, suggesting that learning and identity development extend beyond visible classroom participation.

The study is grounded in sociocultural theory and identity-in-practice perspectives, which conceptualize participation as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a fixed behavior. From this perspective, international students are better understood not as passive or disengaged learners, but as constrained participants who actively and

strategically decide when and how to engage. This reconceptualization challenges deficit-oriented views and calls for a more context-sensitive understanding of student participation.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments in Taiwanese higher education. It recommends targeted language support, pedagogical practices that encourage diverse forms of participation, and structured opportunities for intercultural interaction. Such efforts are essential to fostering equitable participation and enhancing the academic and social experiences of international students.

Keywords: International students; Participation; Identity negotiation; Language barriers; Taiwanese higher education

