

TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH LEARNING: THE EXPERIENCES OF MAINLAND  
CHINESE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN AN ENGLISH UNIVERSITY

Thesis submitted in accordance  
with the requirements of the University of Liverpool  
for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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I dedicate this thesis to Caroline, Ella and my parents  
whose love and sacrifice made this possible.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of the increasing number of Chinese undergraduate students located within the UK higher education system. In order to ensure a positive learning experience for these students, and to facilitate the development of their confidence and independence in learning, it is essential that the particular needs of the Chinese students are fully understood and addressed. This thesis is premised on the assumption that students' own perceptions of their needs are central to this task.

The study contributes to the literature on international undergraduate students' experience within the UK. It develops an analytical framework based upon the Chinese 'contexts of origin' of these students, their UK 'contexts of destination' and the 'institutional learning contexts'. The framework as outlined in the chapters comprising Part 1 views the mediation of cultural difference as central to the resolution of academic challenges faced by Chinese students. Within this framework the 'contexts of origin' are understood with reference to Chinese geopolitical and geo-economic environments, Chinese traditions and education values, and the Chinese education system; the UK 'contexts of destination' are elaborated in terms of the development of UK higher education, the internationalisation and marketisation of UK higher education, and the literature on international students' overall experience; finally, the 'institutional learning contexts' involve an examination of the challenges posed by the academic conventions of UK higher education and of the coping strategies developed by the students.

As outlined in Part 2, the study is based on semi-structured interviews and autobiographical accounts of 18 Chinese undergraduate students in an English university. Following from a discussion of the methodology employed, Part 3 provides an analysis of the evidence gathered in the course of the study. This analysis is organized around three interconnected themes: 'communities of learning', 'learning across language boundaries', and 'becoming an independent learner'. These themes emerged from both the development of the analytical framework and from the initial round of data analysis. The study argues that the challenges faced by Chinese undergraduate students within the UK are culturally, socially and linguistically constituted and cannot therefore be understood simply as technical and narrowly study-related concerns. Their development as independent learners is formed by their motivation to learn and a wide range of capabilities acquired during their study in the UK.

Part 4, which comprises the concluding chapter of the thesis, draws out some wider implications of the study for the education of overseas students within the UK higher education system. These include stronger institutional and departmental support, enhanced professional awareness and practice to facilitate transition, and the creation of a social space for cultural mediation – a 'third place' – within which to negotiate common understandings and practices. Throughout, the emphasis is on the support needs of overseas students as defined and understood by the students themselves and as interpreted by a researcher who is himself a Chinese student studying within the UK higher education system.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CET	College English Test (of the People's Republic of China)
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
ELT	English Language Teaching
HE	Higher Education
HEC	Higher Education for Capability Forum
HEIs	Higher Education Institutes
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LSI	Learning Style Inventory
LSQ	Learning Style Questionnaire
IT	Information Technology
NUS	National Union of Students
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
RP	Received Pronunciation
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SBQ	Study Behaviour Questionnaire
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
PMI	Prime Minister's Initiative
PRC	The People's Republic of China
THE	Times Higher Education
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TQI	Teaching Quality Information
MoE	Ministry of Education (of the People's Republic of China)
NCEE	National College Entrance Examination (of the People's Republic of China)
IATEFL	International Association of Teachers of English
UKCOSA	UK Council for International Education
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
WTO	World Trade Organisation
UKBA	UK Border Agency

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## **PART I – CONTEXTS**

This part provides a context for the study as reported in Part III. It comprises three chapters, which explore Chinese students' contexts of origin (Chapter 1), destination (Chapter 2) and learning (Chapter 3). This part provides the conceptual framework for the research.

## CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTS OF ORIGIN

### Introduction

This chapter consists of six sections, including the geopolitical and geo-economic context, family structure, Chinese traditions, Chinese education values, the Chinese education system and English language education in China. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an insight into social, cultural and educational contexts in which the participants (Chinese international students) of this study live, study and work. It is highly likely that Chinese students' learning approaches and strategies they adopt within the UK HE are shaped and informed by these contexts of origin. The understanding of these contexts is pivotal for the investigation of Chinese international students' learning experience in the UK.

### Geopolitical and geo-economic context



Figure 1.1: China Map (Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas)

With a population of over 1.3 billion people, China is the most populous nation in the world. With its vast land of over 9 million square kilometres, China is the fourth largest country in the world in area following Russia, Canada and the United States (National Geographic 2004). The vast land area is characterized by a considerably diverse natural geography, with high terrain in the West and low terrain in the North. Eastern China consists of vast plains,

low hills, and river deltas, while Western and South-western China are distinguished by plateaux, high mountains, grasslands, deserts and sunken basins. Originating in the Qinghai plateau, the Changjiang (the Yangzi River) and the Yellow River (Huanghe) are two of the longest and most famous rivers in China, as shown in Figure 1.1. Known as the birthplace of ancient Chinese culture and the cradle of Chinese civilization, the Yellow River meanders across nine provinces and autonomous regions from the Western plateaux to the Northern plains. The Changjiang, a major transportation artery, is of great importance in the economic development of its river valley.

The nation consists of Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group, and 56 ethnic minority groups. Han Chinese constitutes over 90% of the population. China comprises 23 provinces, five autonomous regions (Tibet, Ningxia, Guangxi, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia), four municipalities (Beijing—which is also the capital city--Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing), and two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macao). The distribution of population in China is imbalanced, which is caused partly by the diverse geography and partly by uneven regional economic development. The largest population is concentrated in the Sichuan basins, the Changjiang delta, the North China Plain and the East China Plain. Henan province is the most populous region in China with around 92 million people (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2000). Located in central China, Henan has a temperate climate. In contrast Xizang Autonomous Region (i.e. Tibet) has the smallest population in China with its remote location, high plateaux and harsh weather conditions. A number of provinces in eastern and southern coastal areas have the highest concentration of the population. The economic development of these regions attracts a large number of migrant workers from rural areas and the northern part of China.

The open-door policy and economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping<sup>1</sup> in 1978 resulted in the rapid growth of foreign trade and foreign investment. Special economic zones (SEZs) were established in the southern coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan (see Figure 1.2). Subsequently another 14 port cities along the eastern coast and three river delta regions were opened up (see Figure 1.2). The establishment of SEZs and open cities acted as ‘windows’ for new technology, managerial capacity building, knowledge transfer and a sense

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<sup>1</sup> Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) was the most powerful figure in Chinese politics from the late 1970s until his death in 1997. He abandoned many orthodox communist doctrines and introduced elements of free-market system into Chinese economy. He is widely regarded as the architect of the emerging new China.

of openness (Deng 1984). China's exports and imports flourished, stimulating economic growth in southern coastal regions. The economic reforms saw a shift in China's economy from a base in the north-east to the southern coast, and a new pattern in distribution in per capita GDP – statistics show that by 1994 the southern coast regions became the leaders in the provincial per capita GDP (Ying 1999). The preferential policies and promising economic prospects attracted many people of different professions to these economic zones from other parts of China during the 80s; and today these areas continue to be magnets for migrant workers.

Channelling investment, both foreign and domestic, to cities in the coastal regions created new divisions and disparities in China where there had been hardly any inequalities of income before the reforms (Kurlantzick, 2009). In general the disparities in income and economic development appear in three sectors, i.e. urban vs. rural, south vs. north and coastal vs. interior (although there are within-regional differences) as illustrated in Figure 1.3. According to a recent survey (2009), among 34 provincial-level regions, the municipalities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin are the top three cities on the per capita GDP ranking; provinces such as Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, in the east coastal areas, and Guangdong and Fujian, in the south, have per capita GDPs two to three times higher than those of interior provinces such as Shanxi, Jiangxi, Anhui, and north-west provinces such as Xinjiang and Gansu. The rural-urban division in economic development within a region and across regions has become a salient feature. The rural-urban gap in relation to per capita income and consumption has showed a cyclical pattern of declines in the initial years (1979 - 1985) followed by a period of increases (during urban reforms of 1986 to 1993) and then by renewed declines since the initiation of economic reforms (Yang & Fang, 2003). Besides income and consumption, the disparity between rural and urban areas is also evident in education, health care, and housing (Knight & Song, 1999; Knight *et al.*, 2006).

China is currently in rapid transition towards urbanization, although it is still predominately an agrarian country with 57% of the population living in rural areas. Compared with that of 2000, the urban population was estimated to have increased by 6.77% by 2005 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2005). The urbanization saw a rapid influx of migrant workers from rural and less developed areas to big cities and economically advanced regions.



Figure 1.2: Map of China by Region, SEZs and Open Cities (source: So 2003, p.82)

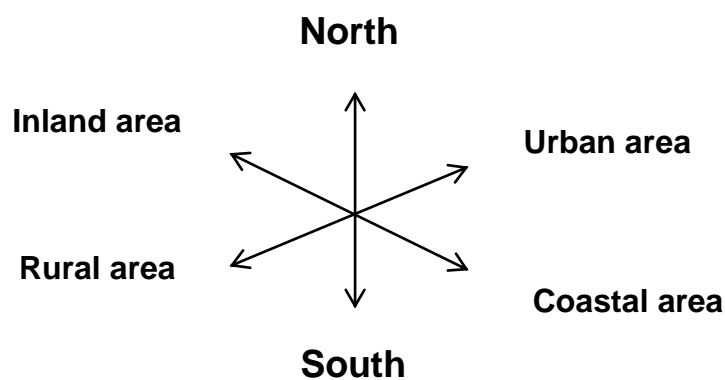


Figure 1.3: Chinese Geopolitical/geo-economical contexts (axes of difference)

Statistics show that over 147 million people formed the so-called floating population in 2005, which represented an increase of 2.96 million from figures compiled in 2000 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2005). This rural-to-urban labour migration is integral to China's rapid economic development (Murphy, 2008), contributing to urban development by providing labour, skills and talents and by filling employment and service gaps in cities. However, migrant workers are discriminated by existing institutions (Veeck *et al.* 2006,



p.249). They are restricted by the *hukou*, China's household registration system, from obtaining social, educational, employment and housing benefits enjoyed by urban residents. Some children of migrant workers are left behind and brought up by their grandparents in the countryside where the quality of education provision is not as developed as that in cities. Children of migrant workers are disadvantaged by high admission fees charged by schools in cities.

However, many parents invest heavily in their child's education irrespective of their family location and their economic condition. The current family structure in China plays a vital role in this phenomenon. The next section is to provide an overview of family structure in contemporary China.

### **Family structure within the Chinese context**

However diverse China's geography and regional economic development is people in China are bound together by the family unit and the shared family values. The importance of family in society is highlighted in Confucian traditions and valued by people in China (although the advocacy of patriarchal dominance of the family is criticized and rejected by the society).

A new family structure is forming in contemporary China, with a reduced family size and a nuclear family structure. The changes are caused by a combination of factors including the one-child policy (whereby each couple is allowed to conceive and rear only one child without incurring penalties (McLoughlin, 2005), rapid economic development and urbanization in China. The traditional type of the extended family household with several generations living under one roof is being gradually replaced by the so-called nuclear family household. A typical nuclear family consists of grandparents, father, mother and one unmarried child. Compared with the per capita household both urban and rural of 1973, 2002 saw a decrease in per capita household by 1.42 (Tang, 2009). However it must be made clear that the extended family household still exists in some parts of rural China; and that the grandparents of a nuclear family household do not necessary live together with the young family. Rural-urban division exists in family scales with 3 per capita household averages in cities compared with 3.62 in the countryside in 2002 (Tang, 2009). Family size tends to be smaller in cities than in rural areas. Although the nuclear family structure predominates, there is an increasing number of 1-member family households and 2-member households (Tang, 2009).

The importance of the development of the only child is reinforced by the new family structure. If the traditional family structure is seen as a pyramid shape, today's family structure in China can be described as an 'inverse pyramid.' In the so-called '4-2-1' family structure (in which 4 represents the grandparents, 2 represents the couple, and 1 refers to the only child of the couple), the only child is the centre of the family and embodies its future (Women of China, 2006). In the '4-2-1' family household, the majority of couples are singletons who were born after the launch of China's one-child policy in 1979. The parents of the singletons are more likely to have experienced disruption to their education during the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They expect their only child to achieve a higher degree of success than they themselves had had a chance to achieve. They provide their only child with all the necessities, financial support and opportunities that they can for their only child's development. The singletons, who used to be called 'little emperors' (spoiled children), have now reached adulthood, and some even have their own child (which is the 1 in the '4-2-1' family structure). Undoubtedly they would follow their parents and focus all their attention on their only child. The difference is they also have their parents to look after since they are the only child and the only one whom their parents have to depend on.

Unlike a child who must share family resources with many siblings, the only child enjoys a heavily concentrated dose of parental investment and attention (Fong, 2004). Today's parents in China invest more resources into their only child's personal and educational development with high expectations. Parents of the only child share the view of education as an essential means not only of a child's personal development but also of their upward social mobility. This understanding is underpinned by Chinese ideological traditions, which is to be discussed in next section.

### **Traditions underpinning Chinese social structure**

Chinese society has been influenced by various schools of Chinese philosophy including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and Maoism. Chinese philosophy is characterized by humanism – the unity of man and Heaven (Chan, 1973). They embrace a shared understanding of Chinese humanism – the attainment of a 'simple life, especially the family life, and in harmonious social relationship' (Lin, 2000, p.100). However different schools of Chinese thought profess differing approaches to the achievement of humanism.

These schools of philosophy pervade Chinese society and culture with different weight. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Maoism are selected in this study for evaluation on the grounds of their profound influence on Chinese society at different levels and time, and their popularity. The main teachings of each school are introduced, with an emphasis on the perception of and approach towards learning and knowledge. The comprehension of these schools of Chinese philosophy would provide an insight into Chinese society and culture from which the participants of this study originate, and into the learning styles and behaviour of the participants.

Chinese philosophy is founded on the idea of the unity of man and nature - Heaven (*tian*) and Earth (*di*), and the harmonious balance of *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*, is regarded as the cosmological foundation of Chinese philosophy and of Chinese culture (Liu 2006). Human relations and relations with nature are symbolized in *Yijing* as trigrams. The eight trigrams (*bagua*), later developed as sixty four hexagrams – *Qian* (Heaven), *Kun* (Earth), *Zhen* (Thunder), *Kan* (Water), *Gen* (Mountain), *Shun* (Wind), *Li* (Fire) and *Dui* (Lake) represent eight different natural phenomena, and a constantly changing cosmos, are associated with social relations (Liu, 2006). It is recognized that the two major Chinese traditional philosophical schools – Confucianism and Daoism – derived onto-cosmological and moral ideas from the philosophy of *Yijing* (Liu, 2006; Cheng, 2008). The Table 1.1 below provides an overview of Chinese traditions.

### ***Confucianism***

Confucianism, represented by Confucius (551-479 B.C.), and some early Confucian thinkers including Mencius (371-289 B.C.), Xunzi (fl. 298-238 B.C.), is regarded as a predominant ‘mainstream’ (Cheng 1991) form of Chinese philosophy. Confucian teaching advocates the idea of individual self-cultivation as the basis of forming a harmonious society. Hwang (2001) understands Confucian teaching as an ethical system of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*) and propriety (*li*), as described in one of the Confucian works, *the Golden Mean*

<i>Periods</i>	<i>Traditions / philosophies</i>	<i>Main ideas</i>	<i>Political environment</i>
<p><b>Ancient China</b></p> <p>- Spring and Autumn period (722 – 481 B.C.)</p> <p>- Warring States period (481 – 221 B.C.)</p>	<p><b>Confucianism</b> – represented by Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.), Mencius (371 – 289 B.C.), and Xunzi (fl. 298 – 238 B.C.), attained supremacy in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - 220), and was officially embraced during Sui (581 - 617) and Tang (618 - 907) Dynasties; and continued as an ideological underpinnings of all feudal dynasties until the demise of the Qing Dynasty</p> <p><b>Daoism</b> – founded by Laozi (6<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.), and developed by Zhuangzi (bet. 399 – 295 B.C.), and adopted as a major philosophy during the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - 8)</p>	<p>Confucianism presents the idea of individual self-cultivation as the basis of forming a harmonious society.</p> <p>Daoism rejects the Confucian ideas that social order and human relations are regulated by the ethical value of benevolence (<i>ren</i>), righteousness (<i>yi</i>), and propriety (<i>li</i>). In contrast Daoism believes in regulating human actions in the Way, or <i>Dao</i> of the universe or nature.</p>	<p>The development of feudal state; the increasingly decline of the Zhou power with the incessant attacks of the Turkish and Hun tribes in the West and the conflict in the South;</p> <p>local military/feudal lords battling for political hegemony;</p> <p>The rise of the Kingdom of Qin.</p>
<p><b>Early Imperial China</b></p> <p>- Eastern Han Dynasty (25 – 220)</p> <p>- The Three Kingdoms (220 – 280)</p> <p>- Sixteen Kingdoms (304 - 439), and Southern (420 - 589)</p>	<p><b>Chinese Buddhism</b> – imported from India (67), started to spread during 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., to develop as an independent doctrine until the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and flourished during Sui (581 – 617) and Tang (618 – 907) Dynasties</p>	<p>Buddhism as a religion for the masses, believing in the intrinsic goodness of human nature, Chinese Buddhism follows the teachings of the Mahayana School – universal salvation. Buddhism believes human relations continue in the Pure Land, which is an extension of Daoist search for immortal life. The Chinese Meditation School highlights the importance of</p>	<p>Expansion of the Empire to Southeast Asia, Northern Korea and Mongolia, and westward to the Tarim Basin during Eastern Han Dynasty; the decline of Eastern Han power due to land privatizations, bureaucratic corruption and feuds among consort clans, eunuchs and Confucian scholar-officials; the Yellow Turban Rebellion; incessant fighting during the Three Kingdoms period (220 – 280 A.D.);</p> <p>Political and social upheaval of Sixteen Kingdoms and Southern and Northern Dynasties;</p>

<p>and Northern Dynasties (386 - 581)</p> <p>- Sui Dynasty (581 – 617) and Tang Dynasty (618 – 907)</p>		<p>self-realization, with a strong emphasis on man.</p>	<p>Sui Dynasty saw the reuniting of the country, expansion of territories, and political, economic and cultural achievement. Tang Dynasty was an era of a golden age: unprecedented prosperity, flourishing of trade, accomplishments in culture, technological innovation, the arts and literature, although no escape from internal conflict and feud, and warfare across borders.</p>
<p><b>Later Imperial China</b></p> <p>- Song Dynasty [the Northern Song (960 - 1126) and the Southern Song (1127 - 1279)]</p> <p>- Yuan (1271 - 1368), Ming (1368 - 1644), Qing (1644 - 1911) Dynasties</p>	<p><b>Neo-Confucianism</b> – can be traced back as early as the later Tang Dynasty, developed in the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279), and officially endorsed during Qing Dynasty; prominent Neo-Confucianism philosophers – Zhou Dun-yi (1017 - 1073), Cheng Hao (1032 -1077), Cheng Yi (1033 - 1107), Zhu Xi (1130 - 1200), Wang Shou-ren/Yang-ming (1472 - 1529)</p>	<p>Neo-Confucianism refers to the <i>Lixue</i> of the Song and Ming Dynasties. <i>Lixue</i> regards Li (Principle/idea), as the natural law of all things; in contrast <i>Xinxue</i>, one school of Neo-Confucianism, considers mind as the principle of all things.</p>	<p>The Song Dynasty enjoyed economic prosperity, great advances in technology, manufacture, and science, and was rich in culture, the arts and intellectual works, but weak in political and military power. The Song empire extended its power southwards, leaving the North and West of China undergone the control of the Qidan (Liao Dynasty 907 - 1125), the Nuzhen (Jin Dynasty 1115 - 1234), and Western Xia Dynasty (1032 - 1227).</p> <p>The Yuan Dynasty, ruled by the Mongols, saw the development of cultural diversity, of the culture exchange between East and West, of foreign trade, but the impoverishment of China. The Ming Dynasty saw great agricultural, economic and cultural development, and social harmony; centralization of the government, eunuchs' control of political power, and internal struggle of cliques.</p> <p>The Qing Dynasty of China experienced peace, prosperity and social harmony, and great expansion of the empire for the first 150 years of the dynasty.</p> <p>Domestic uprising and rebellions started in the year 1775 against the Manchu government;</p> <p>The First (1840 - 1842) and Second (1856 - 1860) Opium</p>

			<p>Wars;</p> <p>Ancient Chinese civilization was invaded by the West. The Boxer Rebellion (1900) against foreign invasions and the Eight-Nation Alliance; The Wuchang revolution (1911) and the establishment of Republic of China (1912).</p>
<p><b>Modern China</b> (1912 - 1978)</p> <p>- Republican China (1912 - 1928);</p> <p>- Nationalist China (1928 - )</p> <p>- People's Republic of China (1949 - )</p>	<p><b>Maoism</b> – known as ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ developed and matured during the Communist revolution in the 1930s and the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was added to the Chinese Communist Party constitution as a revolutionary guiding ideology in 1945. It was regarded as one of the Four Cardinal Principles of Communist Party in 1979. The importance as a guiding ideology was reconfirmed at the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh National Party Congress Central Committee of 1981.</p>	<p>Mao Zedong Thought is manifested in his two major philosophical essays: On Practice (1937), and On Contradiction (1937). Two main ideas emerged from these two essays are the integration of knowledge and practice, and ‘unity of opposites’. Mao Zedong Thought is a political guiding ideology of present Communist Party.</p>	<p>The Civil War (1927 - 1949) – the Long March (1934 - 1935), Zunyi Conference (1935), Second Sino-Japanese War (1937 - 1945);</p> <p>The establishment of People's Republic of China (1949);</p> <p>The Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976);</p> <p>The death of Mao Zedong (1976);</p>
<p><b>Emergent New China</b> (1979 - present)</p>	<p><b>A hybrid political culture</b> - modern Neo-Confucianism</p>	<p>A mixture of Chinese traditional philosophies (described above), communism, socialism, capitalism, individualism and consumerism.</p>	<p>As a result of the Open-Door Policy of Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and economic reform, people started to be more interested in their financial well-being instead of a particular ideology or philosophy. In order to create a ‘harmonious’ society, Confucianism has been re-advocated by the government in hopes providing a guiding moral base for society and for ‘Asian Values’.</p>

Table 1.1: Layers of Chinese tradition

Benevolence (*ren*) is the characteristic attribute of personhood. The first priority of its expression is showing affection to those closely related to us. Righteousness (*yi*) means appropriateness; respecting the superior is its most important rule. Loving others according to who they are, and respecting superiors according to their ranks gives rise to the forms and distinctions of propriety (*li*) in social life. (ch. XX.)

The above passage depicts ethical values of social life and interpersonal relations advocated by Confucian thoughts – show love within a family unit, extend affection to other members of the community, and respect one’s superiors. The Chinese students’ tendency to highly respect those who are senior and superior in scholarship can be traced to Confucian teaching.

Confucian teaching places great emphasis on learning and learning as an essential approach towards self-cultivation. Confucius’ love of learning is manifested in passages of *The Analects* (e.g. 1:1, 5:28). A fundamental idea of Confucian teaching and *the Analects* in relation to learning is learning through reflection. The famous passage of *the Analects* – ‘He who does not reflect will remain ignorant and learn nothing’ (2:15) – clearly states the importance of reflection in learning. Confucian teaching stresses ‘cherishing the old knowledge, continually acquiring new knowledge’, so one can be a teacher of others (2:11). Reflecting upon what one has learned and continually revising and practising are ways to learn. The indication is the emphasis of learning by reflecting on others’ ideas but not the sheer ‘passive reception’ of the knowledge (Ferkins, 2006). Confucius also praised the virtue of ‘not [being] ashamed to seek knowledge from [one’s] inferiors’ (5:14).

Confucian teaching also stresses learning from the past. Confucius showed a ‘religious reverence’ for the past, in the words of Philip Ivanhoe (1990). The past is referred to in terms of the ancients (e.g. 7:1), the sages (e.g. 8:19), and the classics (e.g. 16:13) in *the Analects*. According to Confucian teaching therefore, one acquires knowledge by studying ancient wisdom and traditions, the classical texts through reflecting and thinking.

As a great educator in Chinese history, Confucius’ contribution to learning and educational theory has been well cherished and remembered by Chinese people as sayings, proverbs, maxims, and shared values of Chinese society. Students have been warned of the danger of learning without thinking, and encouraged to feel no shame in asking inferiors. In 1987 at the International Symposium on Confucianism, two main attitudes appeared towards

Confucianism: one saw Confucianism as an outdated political ideology, with no modern value or significance; the other praised Confucian ethical values as ‘a motivating force for personal integration, social-communal participation and moral leadership’; Nonetheless Wu (1987) points out the modernity and progressivism of many of Confucian educational teachings.

### ***Daoism***

Daoism, the second major school of Chinese traditional philosophy, was founded by the legendary figure Laozi (6<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.?), and developed by Zhuangzi (between 399 – 295 B.C.) (Chan, 1973). Although sharing the philosophical foundation of the *Yijing* with Confucianism, Daoism articulates a considerably contrasting ideology. So much so that these two philosophical schools are seen as competing with each other and developing in opposite directions. Nevertheless the division of philosophical territory of these two schools makes them more ‘complementary’ than ‘competitive’ (Fu, 1997, p.553). The complementariness between a Daoist life of withdrawal and the Confucian life of action is manifested in the understanding that when one is on official service, one should be a Confucian while in retirement, one should then be a Daoist (Lee, 2000). Chinese traditions, compared with emphasis of Western Philosophies on the dichotomy between different ideas, embrace the duality between two different contrasting ideals. So it is explicable that Chinese people tend to find a balance in life striving to be both a Confucian and a Daoist. The two most famous texts of Daoist philosophy are the *Daodejing* (Classic of the Way and its Virtue) and the *Zhuangzi*.

Daoism rejects the Confucian ideas that social order and human relations are regulated by the ethical value of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), and propriety (*li*). In contrast Daoism believes in regulating human actions in the Way, or Dao of the universe or nature. The notion of the Dao is the central doctrine of Daoism. According to the Daoist ideology, the Dao is the beginning and ending of all things; the Dao, law of nature is what human action should follow. Dao is understood as ‘Origin or Mother of the Ten Thousand Things, as ‘Principle’, as ‘Function’, as ‘Virtue’, and as ‘Technique’ (Fu, 1997). From Daoist perspectives, Dao presents the way of life in its ‘simplicity’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘tranquillity’, ‘weakness’, ‘effortlessness’ and non-action (Fu, 1997; Chan, 1973).



Daoism's doctrine of non-action (*wu-wei*) has been criticized as negative attitudes of human indifference and apathy. Lin (2000, p.54) comments Daoism embodies all the characteristics of a roguish<sup>2</sup> philosophy of life – a life of 'roguish nonchalance, a confounded and devastating scepticism, a mocking laughter at the futility of all human interference ..., and a certain disbelief in idealism ...' and enables the development of passivism. But non-action does not actually means doing nothing; as Fung (1976) interprets it, it means 'doing less', or 'not over-doing'; it also means 'acting without artificiality and arbitrariness.' Others stress the paradoxicality of the doctrine of *wu-wei*. Angus Graham (1989, p.232) interprets *wu-wei* as the 'paradox that the way to attain a goal is to cease to aim at it deliberately.' So doing nothing is a way to avoid over-doing.

Daoism has had a profound influence on Chinese literature, art, and culture. Daoism is a 'living philosophy' (Yi, 1985) - Daoist language prevails in Chinese society; Daoist cosmology is applied in Chinese medicine; the Daoist way of life is one of the aesthetic themes of Chinese painting, poetry, architecture, gardening and ordinary life. Daoist influence on learning and knowledge is not to be underestimated. Like Confucian tradition, Daoism stresses personal learning but sees it more individualistic and mysterious; more precisely, it is Zhuangzi who sees learning as an 'individual's personal enterprise'; Zhuangzi emphasizes learning with ease and learning effortlessly as the way to the acquisition of genuine knowledge; He deems knowledge as an integral part of one's personal life (Lee 2000, p.5). Paradoxically, negative attitudes towards learning are manifested in *Daodejing*. In the *Daodejing* (ch.48), the pursuit of learning is rejected, and to learn is to distance oneself from the pursuit of Dao. It can be seen that Daoist understanding of learning revolves around its central teaching of Dao.

The *Daodejing* regards the pretence of knowing as a 'disease', and advocates the practice that if one does not know, then one should admit as much – 'To know that you do not know is the best' (ch. 71, trans. Chan, 1973). The Daoist teaching on the approach to acquisition of knowledge bears similarities with the Confucian teaching – 'To say that you know when you do know and say that you do not know when you do not know' (The Analects, 2:17, trans. Chan 1973).

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<sup>2</sup> Lin (2000, p.52) defines an old rogue as a man who has seen a lot of life, and who is materialistic, nonchalant, and sceptical of progress.

## ***Buddhism***

Buddhism is arguably the only foreign import that has had a great impact on Chinese traditions, culture and society. Liu (2006, p.209) comprehends the introduction of Buddhism into China as a 'unique' and a 'peculiar' phenomenon: it was unique because no other outside philosophy has considerably influenced the development of Chinese philosophy; and it was peculiar that Buddhism has had such a tremendous impact since there was such a difference between Indian and Chinese culture. Buddhism has developed as a Chinese philosophy and religion, exercising its influence on Chinese language, food, arts, literature, sculpture and architecture (Lin, 2000; Fung, 1948). According to Fung (1948), Chinese Buddhism did not begin to take its form and start to develop as an independent doctrine from Indian Buddhism and Daoism until the sixth century A D. With the influence of indigenous Chinese traditions, namely Confucianism and Daoism, Chinese Buddhism has developed its distinctive characteristics. Chan (1957-8) has identified three most salient Chinese Buddhism features: as a religion for the masses, believing in the intrinsic goodness of human nature, Chinese Buddhism follows the teachings of the Mahayana School<sup>3</sup> – universal salvation; human relations continues in the Pure Land, which is an extension of Daoist search for immortal life; and the Chinese Meditation School highlights the importance of self-realization, with an strong emphasis on man.

Like traditional Chinese philosophies, Chinese Buddhism shares the understanding that the acquisition of cognitive knowledge from book learning is not true knowledge; true knowledge requires practice and personal experience of cultivation (Wu, 2006). In *Suramgama Sutra*, according to Jiang Wu (2006), 'extensive knowledge' is criticized for lacking in practice. In reality the integration of knowledge gained from books and practice is widely promoted in Chinese education. Students are encouraged to put into practice what they have learnt from books and what they have learnt about theoretical knowledge. To obtain genuine knowledge, *Suramgama Sutra* proposes learning through 'reciting spells, observing precepts, and meditating' (Wu, 2006, p.501).

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<sup>3</sup> The Mahayana School, one of the two major schools of Indian Buddhism, aims to spread the Buddha's teaching to the general public (Liu, 2006, p.218).

## *Neo-Confucianism*

Neo-Confucianism was the third major Chinese indigenous philosophy and had great impact upon the development of Chinese thought. Influenced by Confucianism, it was developed out of the intention of challenging the ideology of Chinese Buddhism (and Daoism). New interpretations of Confucian texts were urged to meet the spiritual interest and contemporary needs of the latter part of Tang Dynasty (Fung, 1976). The emergence of Neo-Confucianism restored the influence of Confucianism and revived the learning of Confucian classics in the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) Dynasties (Nansen, 1997). Moreover, the development of Neo-Confucianism brought fundamental changes to Confucian ideologies. As a result, a ‘comprehensive and complicated doctrinal system’ was formed comprising ‘an evolutionary cosmology, a humanistic ethics and a rationalistic epistemology’ (Yaos, 2000, p.97). Neo-Confucianism was recognized as *Daoxue* (the Learning of the Way), or *Lixue* (the Learning of the Principle) and *Xinxue* (the Learning of the Heart/Mind) (Yaos, 2000, p.56). *Lixue* regards *Li* (Principle/idea) as the natural law of all things while *Xinxue* understands heart or mind as the principle and universe of all things.

Accordingly, the epistemology of *Lixue* and *Xinxue* contrast each other. *Xinxue* emphasizes self-cultivation: the ‘original mind’ or ‘intuitive knowledge’ of benevolence, justice, propriety and wisdom could be gained by self-reflection and the rectification of the mind of bad habits; *Lixue* stresses the self-cultivation and extension of knowledge: the extension of knowledge could be achieved by inductive and deductive study and investigation of things (Chan, 1973). The relations between knowledge and practice were discussed by the two schools of Neo-Confucianism. Zhuxi, the prominent exponent of school of *Lixue*, emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge through practice. According to Zhuxi, ‘Knowledge and action always require each other;’ but ‘when one knows something but has not yet acted on it, his knowledge is still shallow’ (*Complete Works*, f, in Chan 1973, p.609 ). Wang Shouren, one of the exponents of school of *Xinxue* also stressed the importance of Practice in the process of the acquisition of knowledge: ‘Knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge’ (Chan, 1973, pp.669-70).

## *Maoism*

One of the most influential philosophies in Modern China is ‘Mao Zedong Thought’<sup>4</sup> or Mao’s philosophy. Drawn from Marxism ideology, ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ was formed out of the complex situations of communist revolution and social reformations in Modern China (Dirlik, 1997, p.593). Mao’s philosophy is manifested in his two major philosophical essays: *On Practice* (1937), and *On Contradiction* (1937). Two main ideas that emerged from these two essays are the integration of knowledge and practice, and ‘unity of opposites’. There is a degree of resemblance between Mao’s epistemology and Neo-Confucianism. Like Neo-Confucianist teaching, Mao’s ideas value the importance of action and practice to the acquisition of true knowledge. But Mao’s provides a dialectical materialist grounding to the idea of the unity of knowledge and practice - ‘Man’s knowledge’, according to Mao (1937), ‘depends mainly on his activity in material production.’ In *On Practice* (1937), Mao articulates

Discover the truth through practice, and again through practice verify and develop the truth. Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectical theory of the unity of knowing and doing. (On Practice, 1937)

It is a ‘scientific theory’ of integration (Zhang & Li, 1997, p.643) that Mao has contributed to the understanding of relations between knowledge and practice.

The ideology of contradiction - ‘the unity of opposites’ enunciated in Mao’s *On Contradiction* (1937) further enhanced Mao’s recognition of practice being a major driving force towards knowledge (Hawkins, 1974). Contradiction is universal and particular; human knowledge is attained through the process of cognition – ‘from the particular [essence of many different things] to the general (common essence of things) and then from the general to the particular’ (*On Contradiction*, 1937).

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ should be distinguished from ‘Mao’s philosophy/thought’; ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ is the official designation for Maoism or Chinese Marxism, which is a set of collective thoughts of Mao Zedong, teachings of Mao Zedong, and Mao’s writings. ‘Mao’s philosophy’ refers to the philosophical thought of Mao, which is a produce of Mao the individual.

## Chinese education values / underlining purpose of education

Education has been valued highly in China since ancient times. Education is regarded by many people as a major approach to not only personal development and but also upward social mobility. Respect for the educated and learning has been ‘an outstanding characteristic of the Chinese civilization’ (Lin, 1998, p.76). The educated are greatly respected and revered by the society. The educated represent authoritative articulation, and inspire a large magnitude and generation after generation to come. The educated with expertise in a particular field or multi-fields are much sought after in today’s employment markets. Every year the majority of students after finishing their secondary schools take the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) for admissions to higher education. Having a degree is no longer competitive in today’s employment markets in China. For better job prospects graduates opt for further education. Studying abroad has increasingly become a popular choice of many graduates of secondary school and of university/college with the intention of maximizing their employment opportunities. The importance of education originated from ancient Chinese tradition and culture. The character – *Xue* (learning) appeared in *The Analects* 65 times, which shows the great importance Confucius placed on learning.

The value of education for personal development and self-enjoyment is less emphasized and voiced in today’s China. However it was widely advocated in traditional times and was deeply rooted in Confucian ideology. *The Analects*<sup>5</sup> opens its chapters by introducing Confucius’ ideas of learning – ‘To learn and at due times to repeat what one has learnt, is that not after all a pleasure?’ (学而时习之，不亦说乎？) (*The Analects* I.I) which stress the personal joy of learning. Confucius felt enormous affection for learning and valued the delight of learning. In *The Analects*, he emphasized learning or education first and foremost as personal enjoyment. For Confucius learning is something one should take great pleasure in; personal fulfilment is obtained when learning becomes an enjoyment. In ‘He who knows the truth [knowledge] is not equal to him who loves it, and he who loves it is not equal to him who delights in it.’ (知之者不如好之者，好之者不如乐之者) (*The Analects* VI .XX), Confucius shows the difference between knowing the knowledge, loving the knowledge and finding the

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<sup>5</sup> Quotations used herein are from the following translated versions of the Analects: W.E. Soothill (1910) *The Analects of Confucius*, London: Oxford University Press, p.309; A. Waley (2001) *The Analects*, New York: Everyman’s library. The Chinese original is given when this may be useful to the reader.

delights in the knowledge – the joy of acquiring knowledge was once again explicitly articulated.

Just like Confucius, later thinkers such as Mencius, Xun zi, Zhuang zi, accentuated the intrinsic value of education as a personal pleasure, and individual's personal development (Lee, *et al.*, 2000). Accordingly, the personal enjoyment of learning is achievable only on the condition that one has interest in what one is learning. Without interest in and fascination about the knowledge one is acquiring it is hard to imagine how one can find enjoyment and pleasure in learning. In today's China students have enormous pressure regarding the choice of subject they study which is perceived closely associated with their job perspectives. Learning for personal interest and fulfilment is overshadowed by learning for social mobility and employability. Which subject area a student would study in universities to a great extent depends on which area of expertise is most required in employment market and this is a very simple illustration of the changing attitudes towards the value of education.

Education for upward social mobility certainly has its historical and cultural roots. In imperial China one was motivated to learn by the intention of passing the civil service examination. The imperial civil service examination, originated from Sui Dynasty (A.D. 580-950), was well established and developed during Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-906), Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279), Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644), and abolished in 1905 of Qing Dynasty (A.D. 1644-1911). It was used by the imperial government to select government officials. The civil service examination at the outset was applauded as a revolutionary innovation for selecting officials for government which ended the dominant hereditary tradition. Intellectuals with poor family background were given the opportunity to secure government office by passing the examination. The levels of the examination one passed determined the levels of the office one would hold. A higher level of examination would assure a higher office. The civil service examination had great impact on people who had lived during the period of its existence and on their valuation of education/learning. With the influence of the civil service examination learning was less treated as a personal pleasure than as a practical means for obtaining social ascendancy and prosperity. The idea indicated in 'The student when his studies are finished should betake himself to office' (学而优则仕) (*The Analects* XIX. XIII), which had a more respected meaning originally, came to have a derogatory connotation that learning is for the sole purpose of gaining official rank and financial benefits, with the popularity of the

imperial civil service examination. An infamous poem of Song Zhenzong Zhao Heng (968-1022), one of the emperors of the Northern Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1127) – *Lixuepian* (to encourage learning) runs as follows:

富家不用买良田，书中自有千钟粟  
安居不用架高堂，书中自有黄金屋  
出门莫恨无人随，书中车马多如簇  
娶妻莫恨无良媒，书中自有颜如玉  
男儿若遂平生志，六经勤向窗前读。

To be wealthy you need not purchase fertile fields,  
Thousands of tons of corn are to be found in the books.  
To build a house you need not set up high beams,  
Golden mansions are to be found in the books.  
To travel you need not worry about not having servants and attendants,  
Large entourages of horses and carriages are to be found in the books.  
To find a wife you need not worry about not having good matchmakers,  
Maidens as beautiful as jade are to be found in the books.  
When a man wishes to fulfil the ambition of his life,  
He only needs to diligently study the six classics by the window. (Yu & Suen, 2005)

This poem was quoted extensively generations after generations as a motivational motto. The poem projects the ideal life that learning, and passing the civil service examination would lead to – lavish food, luxurious mansions, an entourage, and beautiful women, and enunciates the idea that learning for passing the examination would change one's social status and bring prosperity and privileges to one's family. The civil service examination system had become a dominant approach to social prestige and officialdom in later imperial China (He, 1964).

It would be an exaggeration to claim that students' learning in today's China is driven solely by passing examinations, but to ignore the claim would underestimate its influence. There are three important examinations students face in their student life – junior secondary school entrance examination, senior secondary school entrance examination and National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). High scores in junior secondary school entrance examination would ensure admissions to a top class in a key school, which, it is assumed by many, would lead to better performance during the school and high scores in the senior secondary school entrance examination. Admissions to a top class in a key senior secondary school would maximize students' chances to enter into a good university with a high ranking in league

tables. Obtaining a higher degree has become a potential passport to a well-paid job, which would likely lead to a prosperous life. However as an undergraduate degree qualification does not necessarily secure a job in current competitive employment market, many graduates choose to take masters examination for pursuing a master's degree, or take the State Civil Service Examination (SCSE) in order to qualify for a civil position in governments. Learning has gradually become examination-driven and social mobility-driven.

Last but not least, the social implications of education should not be ignored. Confucian ideology emphasized the social significance of personal learning – the attainment of personal learning contributes to the harmony of the society. A following renowned passage from *The Great Learning*<sup>6</sup> indicates the connection between personal education and social harmony and the emphasis of Confucian ideology on the 'integrated relationship between an individual's moral uprightness and the social and political harmony of the world.' (Lee *et al.*, 2000).

物格而后知至，知至而后意诚，意诚而后心正，心正而后身修，身修而后家齐，家齐而后国治，国治而后天下平

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world. (Translated by Chan, 1963)

Personal moral learning is also promoted by the current Chinese government in the education system. Moral education is a compulsory subject of students at all levels of schooling and universities. The moral education is part of the government initiatives of creating a modern harmonious society.

The Chinese educational values explored above have had considerable influence on the education system. The next section outlines the current education system in China in order to provide an insight into the educational experiences of the research participants and educational stages they have undergone before coming to UK.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Great Learning (Daxue)*, first book of the *Four Books (SiShu)*, was compiled by Zhuxi during the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279) as canonical reading of Confucianism



## **The Chinese education system**

As the world's most populous nation, China probably has the largest education system in the world in terms of student numbers enrolled. The survey (2007a) of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MoE) estimated over 318 million students were enrolled in 630,000 schools in 2006, which is 5 times more than the UK population. In China the education system consists of basic education, higher education and adult education. As illustrated in Figure 1.4 basic education comprises primary and secondary education (including lower and senior middle schools, and specialized secondary and vocational secondary schools); higher education consists of 4-year university education, 2 or 3-year college education, graduate education (including master's and PhD); higher education also takes the forms of radio/TV specialized university education, and self-taught examination which are often associated with adult education; adult education comprises literacy classes, professional and vocational training, radio/TV specialized university education, and self-directed examination preparation.

China's primary and lower secondary education is stipulated in the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 (MoE, 1995) as compulsory. Parents are legally-bound to ensure their children's completion of nine-year compulsory education. The regulation has greatly contributed to the universalisation of nine-year basic education in China although the enrollment rate before 1986 was already very high. The statistics (MoE, 2007b) show that the total enrollment of primary schools in 2006 was around 100 million with an enrollment ratio of 99.3% compared with the total enrollment of 99 million and ratio of 95.9% in 1985. The total enrollment ratio of lower secondary schools in 2006 was 101.9%, representing a rise of 35.2% compared with that of 1990 (MoE, 2007c). The 9<sup>th</sup> 5-year Plan for China's Educational Development and the Development Outline by 2010 (MoE, 1996) projected the achievement of universalisation of nine-year compulsory education by 2010 with 135 million primary school students and 55 million lower secondary school students. MoE (2009) envisages by 2020 China would achieve the basic universalization of higher secondary education (MoE, 2009).

Achieving universal access to higher secondary education will be quite a challenge considering the current emphasis on examinations. Chinese education system is examination-driven. The examination tradition in China can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century when the imperial civil service examination was officially established as mentioned above. Today,

progress to each level of education from nine-year compulsory to higher secondary to higher education requires passing entrance examinations. Students must take end-of-term examinations at each level of nine-year compulsory education. After taking their junior secondary school-leaving examination students who wish to progress to higher secondary schools must take the entrance examination and pass it with satisfactory grades.

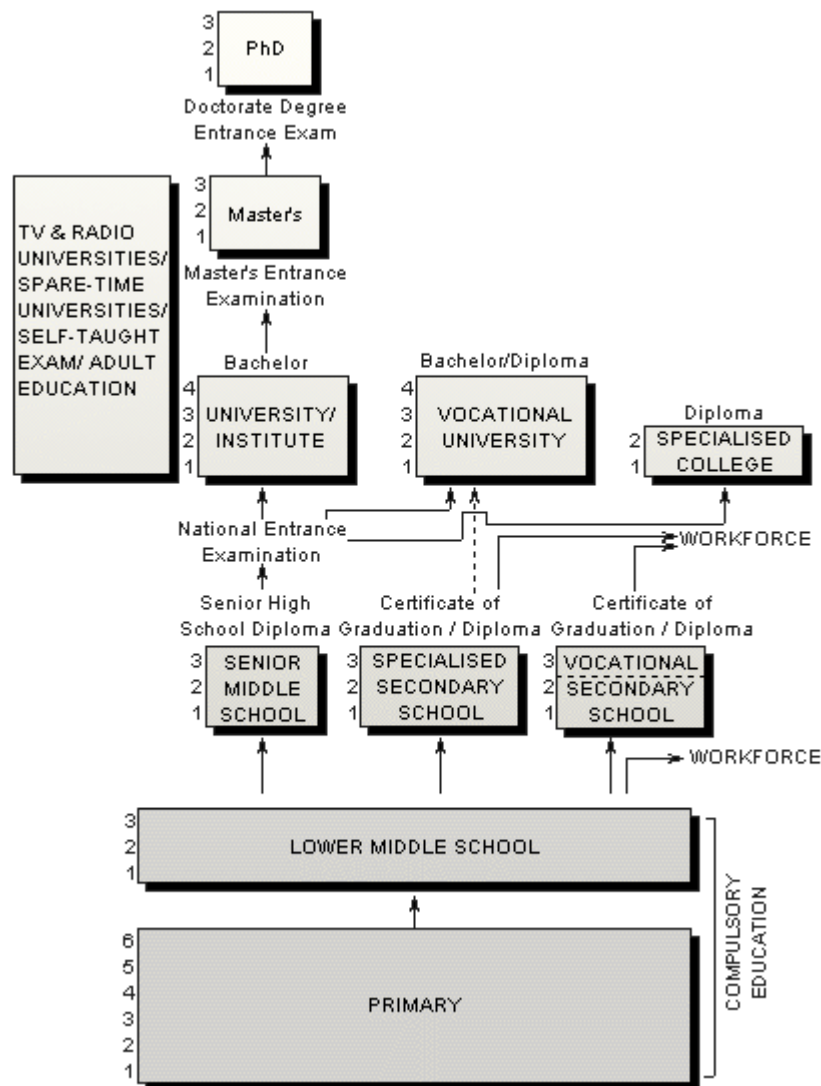


Figure 1.4: Current Chinese education system (source: UK NARIC, 2008)

In 2006 75.7% of junior secondary graduates went on to senior high school compared with only 40.6% in 1990 (MoE, 2007d). However entrance to a key higher secondary school is highly competitive. Key senior high schools are better equipped than regular ones with higher quality teaching and public esteem (Wang, 2003). Admission to key senior high school and to key class of the school will maximize a student's chance to achieve high marks in the

National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and to be admitted into a prestigious university.

In recently decades China has undergone a transition from elite to mass higher education (Zha, 2008; Pretorius & Xue, 2003). Higher education in China is playing an important role in economic development and modernization. Expansion of higher education in China is driven by an increasing number of students who wish to obtain higher education; and the demand for highly qualified human resources due to rapid growth in the economy, and development in science and technology (Zha, 2008; Pretorius & Xue, 2003). The expansion of higher education is rapid, and by 2005 China has achieved internationally recognized mass higher education, with 23 million students recruited by all forms of HEIs and a gross enrollment rate of 21% (CERNET, 2006); by 2006 the gross enrolment of the 18-22 age group in HEIs has reached 22% compared with that of 3.4% in 1990 (MoE). Measures have been taken to improve the quality of higher education during the process of massification. China's Project 211 (MoE, 1996) was launched to develop 100 top-class key universities and key disciplines. Project 985 (Jin, 2009) was aimed to develop world-class universities and world renowned research universities. Universities enlisted in Project 211 and Project 985 received large amount of government funding to develop key disciplines and infrastructure, and to improve teaching quality.

Students who wish to attend HEIs must pass the NCEE. The NCEE (*Gaokao*) is the entry examination to higher education in China. It is a highly centralized examination system held across China on June 6, 7 and 8 every year (Yu & Suen, 2005) and is extremely competitive. There is a hierarchy of higher education institutions in China with key universities (encapsulated in Project 211 and 985) on the top and local HEIs in smaller cities at the bottom. Students are pressured to work extremely hard in order to receive admission to prestigious national key universities at the top of the ranking table. Families in China share the traditional value that education is linked with upward social mobility. The more esteemed university they go to the more chances students can secure good jobs and a better future. Also as they are the only child of the family, admission to a good university brings honor to the family and means the students have lived up to their parents' expectations. Children of middle-class families who fail to enter universities in China are often sent overseas for higher education. Many wealthier families choose to send their child to study abroad even at senior high school level.

## **English language education within the Chinese education system**

English language education is important in all levels of education in China. Starting from the Grade 3 of primary school<sup>7</sup>, English language learning continues throughout primary and secondary levels of schooling, and also higher education level. English is a compulsory subject in the entrance examination for institutions of higher education. China's attitudes towards English language have changed over the course of history. Perceived as a 'barbarian language' in the late Qing Dynasty, spoken only by the despised 'rascals and loafers' of Chinese society (Feng Guai-fen, 1860), English language is now assured a prominent role and status in today's China, being the most spoken foreign language of the nation. English language is being taught in schools, colleges and universities in all parts of China. English learning starts as early as in kindergartens in some coastal cities. Government attitudes and policies towards English education have been shaped by China's relations with Western countries and by the political, social and economic development of China. Historically English language learning has been regarded as a 'barometer of modernization' (Ross, 1982).

Bob Adamson (2004, 2002) has assessed English education in China by dividing Chinese history into three periods – the Qing Dynasty, the Republican era and the People's Republic of China. It is clear and neat to discuss China's English education in this way since English in China has been shaped by dominant policy makers of the day and fluctuations of Chinese history. Drawing on Adamson (2002)'s periodisation of China's English education this section is to introduce briefly English education in China in an historical perspective. Much attention will be given to the development of English language education in relation to English language teaching (ELT) approaches and students' learning experiences, in modern China since the initial announcement of the Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy through to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the present day.

Contact between China and English language has a long history, which dated back to Qing Dynasty China in the early seventeenth century. Despised as a 'barbarian language', English was spoken in various forms of 'pidgin English' by compradores in the trading port Canton (Guangzhou) solely serving the purpose of communicating with foreign nations for trading during the mid-eighteenth century to the early 1860s. The term 'pidgin English' was also

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<sup>7</sup> According to the new national curriculum for school English issued by the Ministry of Education in September 2001, English should be taught from Grade 3 onward in primary schools at municipal and county level.

referred to as a ‘jargon of broken English’, in the words of Anson’s (1748), one of the early travellers to China. Compradores, also called ‘linguists’ (Feng Guai-fen, 1860), received no formal English language education.

Teaching of English was first introduced in mission schools in cities of treaty ports including Amoy (Xiamen), Canton (Guangzhou), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), Shanghai and Macau from the end of the first Opium War (1839-1842) and was extended to the other treaty ports and inland China following the end of the Second Opium War (1856-1860) (Bolton, 2002). The defeat of the Opium War (1839-1842) forced the Qing government to concede the necessity of learning western technological ideas and English language. An imperial institute of translation – *Jingshi Tongwen Guan* (Interpreters College in Peking) – was established in 1861 in Beijing by the late Qing government to teach foreign languages (predominantly English). The essence of English teaching in the imperial institute was to train language interpreters and translators to facilitate the learning of western expertise and to provide services for *Zongli Ge Guo Shiwu Yamen* – an imperial foreign affairs office.

The era of changes in the political arena, the demise of the Qing dynasty and the emerging and establishing of a new China headed by progressive reformers, witnessed not only the political, economic and social turmoil of the nation but also ideological, philosophical and cultural turbulence. In the wake of the founding of the Republic the clash between the intellectuals of Chinese traditionalism and those of new revolutionary progressivism brought about the intellectual revolution (1917-1923) which staged great debates and discussions of various schools of ideology and values of the day striving for the ‘ideological reconstruction’ of the nation (Teng & Fairbank, 1965). This clash between traditionalists’ ideology and reformists’ ideology was also reflected in their conflicting attitudes towards English in China. Resentfully resisted by traditionalists, English obtained high official status with its institutionalization in the curriculum and increased opportunities to learn the language (Adamson, 2004, 2002).

High official status of English was further assured by the fact that job opportunities were maximized for those graduated who from missionary institutions and returned from America. Prior to the 1911 revolution and the establishment of the Republic, English was incorporated into the secondary school curriculum in 1902 in ‘His Majesty’s Teaching Standards for Primary and Secondary Institutions’ and the teaching of English focused on reading and

translation with learning of grammar and vocabulary, and of pronunciation by imitation and repetition (IATEFL, 2000). The American system of education was adopted in 1922 and American missionary schools/colleges boomed. English was widely taught in missionary schools. Schools were not the only channels for learning English and the mass media provides a convenient means for learning. By 1922 teaching of English tended to put more weight on listening and speaking according to the 'Outlines for School Syllabuses of the New Teaching System' (IATEFL, 2000).

English language education underwent a number of changes in the People's Republic of China. The establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1949 opened a new chapter in China's history. The first decade of the People's Republic saw a close relationship with the former Soviet Union. Russian was promoted favourably and taught widely in Chinese secondary schools during the period of the close relationship although English was also allowed to be taught in schools. Russian methods of teaching were adapted to ELT emphasizing grammar translation. With the political and economic development within the country and worsening relations with the former Soviet Union, teaching of English along with other foreign language was resumed in secondary schools in the late 1950s. During 1960s English was reinstated as a major foreign language in the secondary school curriculum and due to the shortage of English teachers many teachers of Russian were retrained as English teachers. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw the disruption in education in general and foreign language learning in particular. It was not until the late 1970s that English began to regain its popularity in China.

The introduction of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy (1978) and economic reform witnessed a growing contact between China and the rest of the world. English, as a medium of communication for international trade and technological exchanges, played an important role in China's economic development and opening to the world. The increasing demand for English proficiency has been felt across the country (Wu, 2001). Consequently, there has been a surge in learning English, because it is the language for facilitating not only China's modernization, but also individual development. A good grasp of English leads to better job opportunities in foreign trading companies or in the civil service. As a compulsory subject in university entrance examinations, high scores in the English examination means a better chance of being accepted into universities. Studying abroad in America, Australia, Britain, Canada and other English-speaking countries requires a certain level of English proficiency.

Private learning of English has been thriving. Most popular private learning has been through TV and radio broadcasts of English language programmes, such as the popular English TV show *Follow Me* in the 1980s, and *Family Album U.S.A.* in the 1990s. English Corners (*yingyu jia*) have been the favourite place for English learners to discuss and converse in English. Students and adult learners attend evening or weekend English classes. The popularity of English and its official status was enhanced with China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games.

The importance of English has also been reflected in the development of ELT in the formal education system. English has been highly promoted in the secondary school curriculum and higher education since the opening up of China to the world in the late 1970s. English is a core subject for entry examinations in secondary schooling and a compulsory subject for entry into universities. English is also compulsory in the entry examinations for master's and doctorate levels of study. The instruction time allocated for English in secondary schools has generally increased from 656 hours in 1978, 768 hours in 1982 (Adamson, 2004) to 1000 hours currently. Irrespective of their majors in Arts or Science, non-English majors' students in universities are required to study English. A pass in the College English Test Band Four (CET-4) is a prerequisite for obtaining an honours degree at undergraduate level. For able students who would like to demonstrate their high level of proficiency in English they can choose to take CET-6 (optional). For English majors, different English test systems, which set a much higher standard than the tests for non-English majors, are used to assess their English proficiency.

The year 1982 was a turning point in secondary school English curriculum with a set of revised new textbooks and new syllabuses emphasizing learning of foreign cultural and scientific knowledge (Adamson & Morris, 1997). In the new textbooks political contents that prevailed in previous textbooks were removed in favour of the introduction of western culture and scientific knowledge. In the revised 1982 curriculum, the pedagogical approach to ELT was a mixture of traditional Chinese methods of a structural/Grammar-Translation approach and Western methods of Audiolingualism and the Functional/Notional approach (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hu, 2002a). The audio lingual approach was characterized by oral drilling through repeating structural patterns and phrases; and pronunciation, intonation and stress were practised through oral repetitive drilling. Although there was an infusion of the oral repetitive practice, emphasis was still placed on stressing learning grammar rules,

memorizing vocabulary, written language and accuracy with little attention on speaking (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hu, 2002a). The grammar-translation methods tended to be teacher-centred, textbook-centred and grammar-centred. In practice teachers would translate each passage of the reading, and explain key grammatical rules and syntax in the passage in the classroom. Students in junior level of secondary school were required to memorize passages of text and recite them word for word.

Reforms have been carried out in pedagogical approach to ELT since the late 1980s. The reformed English language teaching approach aims to develop students' communicative competency at secondary school level. The essence of communicative language teaching (CLT) was incorporated into English language teaching in secondary schools. The English curriculum of 1993 saw the change of direction in English teaching aiming to develop students' competence in using English for communication (Adamson & Morris, 1997). The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has not been accepted without resistance and scepticism. Debates (e.g. Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Hu, 2002b, 2005; Li, 1984; Liao, 2004; Rao, 2002; Wang, 2001; Yu, 2001) on the suitability and effectiveness of applying CLT to the classroom in China have identified a number of constraining factors on the implementation of CLT in the Chinese classroom – the Chinese culture of teaching and learning, the lack of qualified English teachers and teaching resources, large class sizes, and national college entrance examinations and CET. The reforms in ELT in China have intended to steer away from the emphasis of the traditional ELT pedagogy's 'three-centeredness' – 'teacher-centeredness, textbook-centeredness, and grammar-centeredness' (Yen, 1987) to 'eclecticism' (*duoyangxing*) with the pedagogical approach stressing the development of four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – which was advocated during the 1960s (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hu, 2002; Ross, 1992). Taking into consideration the constraints and the Chinese context an eclectic approach combining the communicative approach with the traditional teaching methods seems the appropriate choice for English language teaching in China.

Those students who intend to take on an undergraduate or postgraduate course in English-speaking countries normally attend pre-departure training programmes offering intensive English language training and English language test preparation courses, provided by a large number of English language training centres (e.g. Beijing New Oriental school) in China as they are required by universities admissions overseas to demonstrate their English language



proficiency by taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test or other equivalent tests and by achieving a certain score. The main objectives of these English test preparation courses are to train students how to achieve the scores in the tests required by the universities admissions. For instance students are taught how to guess answers in a typical IELTS listening or reading test, or are given a writing template on structure. One can argue that the skills learnt from these preparation courses such as skimming and scanning, or an increased vocabulary would be beneficial in their future studies. But achieving high scores in these tests does not necessarily mean that students can successfully overcome the linguistic challenges facing them. Some studies show that students who have achieved high test scores (e.g. IELTS scores 6.5 or 7.0) still face difficulties in listening, speaking and writing (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1995; Durkin, 2004; Edwards & Ran, 2006; Su & Norton, 2008). Furthermore some students with high test scores lack awareness of host countries' cultures, academic cultures and conventions of these countries, which have contributed to the causes of difficulties in their academic studies in Western universities (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1995; Edwards & Ran, 2006; Su & Norton, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of Chinese contexts of origin. China is the most populated nation in the world, with diverse natural geography and imbalanced regional economic development. As a result, diversions and disparities in economic development prevail between urban and rural, south and north, and coastal areas and the interior. Rapid urbanization saw a large amount of labourers migrating from rural, poorer and less developed areas to urban areas, and to southern, and economic developed cities. China's one-child policy had a great impact on family structures and parents' attitudes towards their child's education. The size of families has become smaller, and the singleton is the centre of a family and of their parents' universe. No matter how rich or poor they are, parents endeavour to provide their only child with the best living standards and education. Nevertheless parental attention does not consist solely of love, support, and pampering, for as Fong (2004) states, also it also consists of discipline, demands and expectations. Hence today's child in China endures more pressure than previous generations.

Education is highly valued in China. It is perceived by many as an important means not only of personal development but of upward social mobility. This understanding has its deep roots

in traditional Chinese philosophies and traditions. For instance Confucian teaching is interpreted as regarding learning not only as self-cultivation or a pleasure but also as a means to social ascendancy (to become an official). China has universalized 12-year compulsory education and is on the way to universalize 3-year senior high school education. Students are required to sit the highly competitive NCEE to obtain admission to higher education. With high levels of pressure and parental expectation they have to work hard for entry into a good university.

Having a long history of contact with the English language, China understands its importance in its modernization. English language education is taught at all levels of education and is a core subject at secondary schooling and a compulsory subject in the NCEE. Traditionally English language was taught with a concentration on grammar and vocabulary learning. There has been a development of incorporating communicative language teaching into the traditional methods of teaching. Attention is now given to the development of students' competence in using English for communication (Adamson & Morris, 1997). However many Chinese students tend to have a good grasp of English grammar and vocabulary but find it difficult to communicate in English. Chinese students who have achieved satisfactory scores in IELTS or TOEFL required by HEIs overseas find themselves disadvantaged by the unfamiliar academic culture and conventions of western universities (e.g. Edwards & Ran, 2006). In the next chapter, the context of destination is discussed, in order to provide an insight into the HEIs in which international Chinese students undertake their studies.

## **CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTS OF DESTINATION**

### **Introduction**

The contexts of origin examined in the last chapter provide important insights into the social, geo-political and cultural background of Chinese students from the People's Republic of China. Chinese students come from an environment which differs considerably from that of the UK. Although, since the Open Door policy was implemented, Chinese society has been exposed to Western ideologies and commodities, traditional values and family principles have generally been preserved and sustained across the society. The majority of Chinese students who are doing undergraduate studies in UK are in their early 20s (though there is attendance of other age groups). They tend to be the only child of a family, sharing many of the characteristics of young people everywhere, but inculcated with Chinese traditions and morals, and the state of mind of being a Chinese.

It is logical and necessary to investigate the development and current situation of UK HE and HEIs, so as to attain an understanding of the context within which the Chinese students in this study have chosen to pursue their education. This chapter looks at the historical development of British HEIs, and the current discourse prevailing in UK HE. There are over one hundred UK HEIs ranging from 'ancient' universities, through civic or 'redbrick', and the later post-Robbins or 'plate glass' universities, to the new universities of post 1992, and the newest universities recently granted university status, as illustrated in table 2.1. International students are welcomed by considerably cosmopolitan UK HEIs with the result that they host an increasingly diverse student body, and the teaching and learning approaches are increasingly being infused with international and multicultural dimensions. This chapter provides a preliminary study of the major discourses in higher education – massification, internationalisation and marketisation. It is not exclusive comprehensive coverage of these discourses due to limited space; the focus will be on presenting a general picture of UK HE and the provisions for international students. An overview of literature on international students' experience in UK HEIs is also provided.

## Historical overview of UK HE

Higher education in the UK is internationally renowned for its academic excellence in learning, teaching and research. Britain enjoys the international fame of having two of the oldest universities in the English-speaking world – the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, dating back to twelfth century and thirteenth century respectively. As the representatives of the ancient national university system<sup>8</sup>, Oxbridge<sup>9</sup> has considerably shaped the development of the modern university system in Britain (Anderson, 2006). The prestige and superiority of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in British higher education system are indisputable. Not only had these two universities dominated the higher education system in the past, Oxbridge has also maintained its superiority in today's academic community nationally and internationally. Oxbridge tops the latest Sunday Times University League Table (2008), and are rated as two of the top 10 universities in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University world university rankings (2008). With a history of helping secure the contemporary 'religious, political and social orthodoxy' of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Hugh, 1973, p.3), Oxbridge emphasized the liberal arts education and stressed primarily the learning of philosophy and theology. Today Oxbridge sustains its humanistic tradition with an infusion of research in the natural and applied sciences (University of Oxford, 2008), boasting excellence in many humanities and sciences subjects.

Alongside the ancient universities there are civic universities established in the industrial cities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century including Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield and Bristol. The civic universities, known as 'big civics', represent high academic standards (Holmes, 2001). Many of these civic universities originated from colleges and institutes set up by local industrialists. With no intention of solely serving industries and commerce, these colleges embraced a 'dual mission' (Barnes, 1996, p.275) of committing to liberal education and of promoting scientific research and technical instruction, and Richard B. Haldane's vision of 'civic universities' (he coined the term) supporting the co-existence of liberal education and scientific research (Armytage, 1955; Barnes, 1996; Jones, 1988).

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<sup>8</sup> There are ancient universities in Scotland which date back to medieval Britain (1066 - 1485) and Tudor England (1485 - 1603) including the universities of St. Andrews (1411), Glasgow (1451), Aberdeen (1495) and Edinburgh (1583).

<sup>9</sup> Oxbridge – to find definition from Oxford English Dictionary

The original six civic universities and another two universities have also been recognized as Redbrick (or Red Brick) universities. The term Redbrick came from *Redbrick University* (1943)<sup>10</sup> by 'Bruce Truscot' (the pseudonym of E. Allison Peers, a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Liverpool). His book, delineating many problems of newly-chartered universities, aroused a series of debates and discussions on the idea and the nature of a university, and the relations between the redbrick universities and Oxbridge. On the one hand he saw research and teaching as 'one single aim' of a university, and on the other hand Peers advocated the importance of research to a university, in his own words 'the primary aim of the university must be the search for knowledge – re-search' (Truscott, 1943, p.48).

The Redbrick University group later extended to include a number of other universities which originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and gained university status before 1963. Comprehensive as they are now, the Red Brick Universities offer a broad range of subjects in arts and science. Today the Red Brick Universities are associated with the Russell Group. The Russell Group universities are research-intensive in arts and science and boast excellence in teaching, learning and research. Among the top ten universities which were reported as having the largest number of students from China and Hong Kong in 2005/6, six of them are the members of the Russell Group; and universities of Warwick and Manchester ranked first and second, respectively (THE, 2008). Many of the Red Brick Universities excel in a wide range of research fields. For instance, the universities of Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Birmingham, and Nottingham rated A\*5 on the Sunday Times University League Table (2008) based on research quality in such subjects as Accounting and Finance, Sociology, Aeronautical and Manufacturing Engineering, Biological Science, Politics, Chemical Engineering, and Theology and Religious Studies.

The 1960s saw the expansion of institutions of higher education in the UK. In the wake of Robbins Report of 1963 on higher education, a number of universities, known as 'Shakespearean universities', were established, including the universities of York, Lancaster, Warwick, Sussex, Essex, Kent, and East Anglia; some colleges of advanced technology, such as Aston, Bath, Loughborough and Salford received university status. Although public debate

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<sup>10</sup> *Red Brick University* was published in 1943, and *Redbrick and these Vital Days* in 1945; in 1951 a combined edition of *Red Brick University* was published. *Red Brick* was used for the 1943 title, *Redbrick* for the 1945 sequel and *Red Brick* for the 1951 edition, Cf. UoL (2007), *Biographies - Edgar Allison Peers*, Special Collections & Archives, University of Liverpool; H. Silver (1999) *The Universities' Speaking Conscience: 'Bruce Truscot' and Redbrick University*. *History of Education*, 28(2), p.173

on university expansion had already begun and plans had been drawn up before the publication of the report, the Robbins Report was regarded as a 'symbol of post-war university expansion' and 'a decisive turning-point' (Anderson, 2006, p.131). The new universities of the 1960s were quite different from the ancient universities and big civics. These new universities were characterised by their distinctive physical (built on green-fields in non-industrial towns), organisational (structured as campus universities; creating schools of studies, or large departments with several disciplines) and academic/cultural (to be extramural and modern) features (Scott, 1991).

Another group of the new universities consists of former polytechnics which achieved university status in 1992 and former colleges that have gained university status since 1992. The 30 polytechnics were originally developed under the initiatives of the 'binary policy' for higher education articulated by Tony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science, in 1965 (Aldrich, 2002). The polytechnics were intended to create a close association with local business and industries providing vocational and technical training. In a sense points of similarity between the polytechnics and civic universities are evident. These former polytechnics and former colleges are more associated with the concept of diversity of learning, inclusion, widening participation, accessibility, flexibility, innovation in teaching and assessment. With an emphasis on vocational and professional education many of these new universities are also committed to scholarly research, and have gained national and international recognition of excellence in research. The ranking of these new universities in national league table varies in average teaching and research quality and in the range of subjects. The Open University, one of the products of university expansion in the 1960s, was established in 1969, and has developed as a primary provider of distance learning. Some of courses at the Open University are open to students who live outside of UK.

A number of higher education colleges have been conferred the university title since 2005. The creation of these universities is the largest expansion since the polytechnics became universities in 1992 (MacLeod, 2005). Some of the newest universities can trace their history back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Liverpool Hope University, the institution within which the research participants are undertaking their undergraduate studies, originated from two 19<sup>th</sup> century colleges and one college established in 1965. The newest universities such as Liverpool Hope, Edge Hill, Chester, and Bath Spa have undergraduate degree and postgraduate taught degree awarding powers. Some of them, such as Queen Margaret

University and Liverpool Hope University, have postgraduate research degree awarding powers, while others are in the process of applying for them.

### The UK HE system now

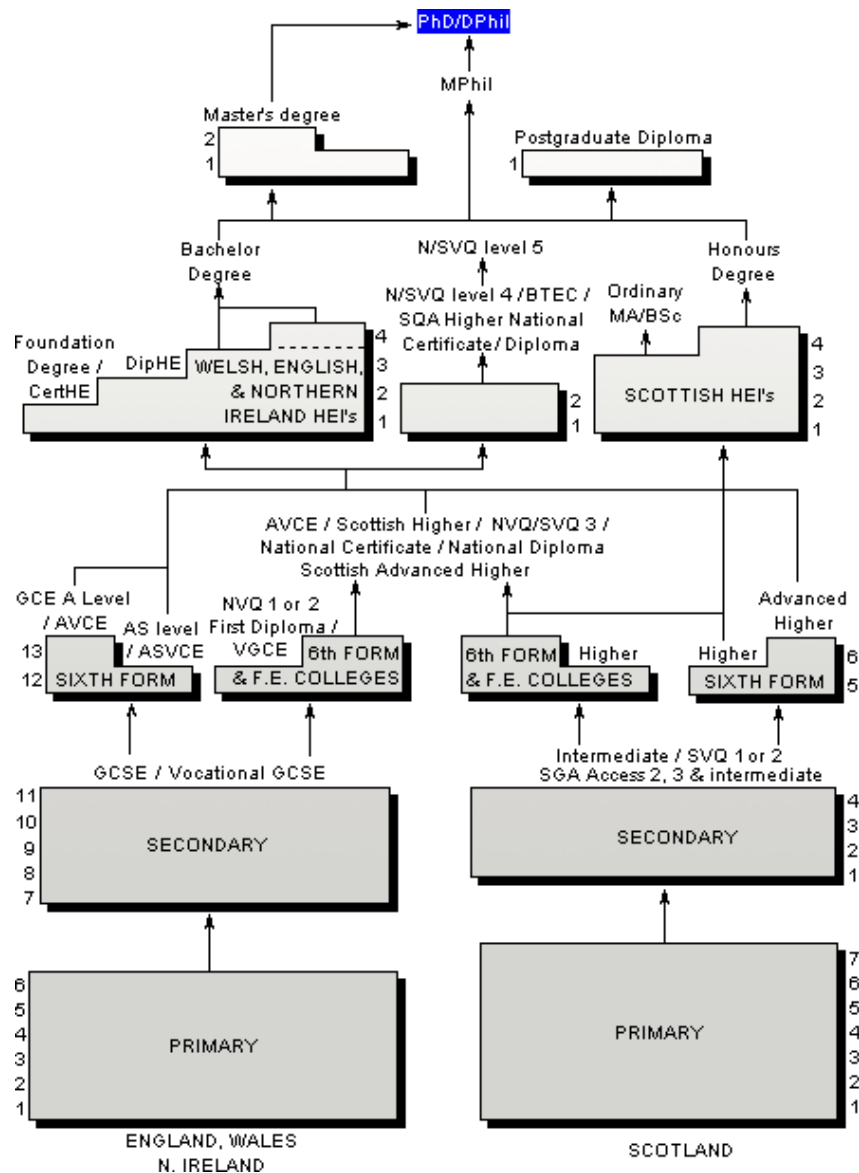


Figure 2.1: Current UK education system (source: UK NARIC, 2008)

<i>Periods</i>	<i>Development of university</i>		<i>political environment</i>
Medieval times / the middle ages (800 – 1500)	<b><i>Medieval British universities</i></b>	Oxford (1167) Cambridge (1209) St Andrews (1413) Glasgow (1451) Aberdeen (1495)	These universities were founders of European scholarship and mainly served the needs of church and state, with a vocational and utilitarian character (Anderson, 2006).
	<b><i>Traditional Chinese education institutes</i></b>	Imperial Nanjing Institute (258) Songyang Academy (484) Bailudong Academy (940) Yuelu Academy (976) Suiyang Academy (1009)	These traditional Chinese higher institutes can be traced back as early as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771 – 221 B.C.) (Hayhoe, 1989)
Late 19 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	<b><i>Civic universities / Redbrick universities</i></b>	Birmingham (1900) Liverpool (1903) Leeds (1904) Sheffield (1905) Bristol (1909) Nottingham (1948) Southampton (1952) Newcastle (1963)	Civic/Redbrick universities are originated as colleges and institutes set up by local industrialists. They were created for a dual mission of liberal education and scientific research. The Civic/Redbrick universities later extended to include a number of other universities which were originated from the 19 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries, and gained their university status before 1963.
	<b><i>Modern Chinese universities</i></b>	Peiyang (1895) Nanyang (1886) Zhejiang (1897) Peking (1898) Nanjing (1902) Hong Kong (1910) Tsinghua (1911) Harbin (1920) Beijing Normal (1923)	<p>After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 1895, Qing Dynasty founded the first modern Chinese university, Peiyang University, to strengthen the country's modernisation. It was a start of establishments of modern Chinese universities. In the next 50 years, many modern universities were created by Chinese governments, foreign governments and western missionaries based on mainly western university models.</p> <p>The People's Republic of China was established in 1949. Since then, all private universities and missionaries universities were banned or closed due</p>



		People's (1949)	to policy change in higher education. The following 30 years, China adopted a Soviet model for the higher education, which created many specialised institutes in science and engineering for the development needs of a new communist country.
1960s	<b><i>Plate Glass universities</i></b>	East Anglia (1963) York (1963) Lancaster (1964) Essex (1964) Kent (1965) Warwick (1965) Aston (1966) Bath (1966) Loughborough (1966) Open (1969)	Created for a massive post-war university expansion. The Robbins Report (1963) provided a turning-point of this expansion.
	<b><i>Chinese universities during the Cultural Revolution</i></b> (1966 – 1976)	n/a	The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China almost dismantled its whole modern higher education system due to internal political struggles. Universities stopped recruiting students for 5 years and the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) was abolished.
1992	<b><i>Post-1992 / New universities</i></b>	Oxford Brookes (1992) Liverpool John Moores (1992) Manchester Metropolitan (1992) Coventry (1992) Westminster (1992) Greenwich (1992)	New universities are originated mainly from former polytechnics which were developed under the initiatives of the 'Binary Policy' of 1965. There were similarities between the polytechnics and civic universities in relation to their association with local business communities and industries.

	<b><i>Chinese universities</i></b>	Henan Agricultural (1984) Beijing Posts and Telecommunications (1993) Beijing Sport (1993) CEIBS (China Europe International Business School) (1994) China Agricultural (1995)	After the Cultural Revolution, NCEE was resumed in 1979. The western model of higher education was brought back. Since then, China experienced a rapid development of universities to meet the demands of the four modernizations (agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology).
2000s	<b><i>Newest universities</i></b>	Liverpool Hope (2005) Chester (2005) Bath Spa (2005) Winchester (2005) Edge Hill (2006) Cumbria (2007) Queen Margaret (2007)	A number of newest universities have been created since 2005. It was the largest expansion since the polytechnics became universities in 1992. Creation of more universities was regarded as drivers of the knowledge economy (MacLeod, 2005).  In 2007, the number of students at UK universities was 2,306,105 and 239,210 of them were non-EU international students (HESA, 2008). By August 2008, there were 109 universities and 169 higher education institutions (Universities UK, 2009).
	<b><i>Chinese universities</i></b>	Chang'an (2000) Yangtze (2003) Zhongbei (2004) Communication (2004) Henan Technology (2004) Xi'an Foreign Language (2006) TianJin Business (2007)	Since 1997, China experienced a similar massification and marketisation of higher education. As a result, universities were merged and created to cope with a much larger number of student enrolments and huge demand for higher education.  By 2006, there were 1,867 regular higher educational institutions in China with a total student enrolment of 26,534,804 (Ministry of Education of China, 2007).

Table 2.1: Some key moments in the development of higher education in UK and China

### ***Massification of higher education***

The expansion of British HEIs in the 1980s and 1990s accompanied by the end of the binary system of polytechnics and universities has been accompanied by the transition from elite to mass participation in the higher education system (Scott, 1995). Student numbers increased dramatically. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, British HE has become ‘a truly mass system with 1.8 million students and an age participation index of 33 percent’ (Scott, 2001). The transformations have demanded an altered perception of HEIs on students’ role in education. A diversity of the university student body requires drawing attention to students’ experiences in all acknowledged roles (Haselgrove, 1994).

One of the salient implications of mass higher education is the diversity of the student body in British HEIs. Over the years British Higher Education has witnessed the rapid expansion and changes in this population. The traditional predominance of under-21 school leavers, white, male, able-bodied, from middle-class families attending universities is no longer the case. Over-21s, mature students, female students, ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, students from the working class, and international students have joined the cohort of universities entrants. Statistics from 1991-92 show that there was a significantly faster increase in female entrants than male entrants; female entrants consisted of 50% of the student population in polytechnics and colleges; the dramatic growth was also seen in the undergraduate intake of full-time home students over 25 years of age (McNay, 1994). There was a considerable growth in the numbers of students from an ethnic minority background in the early 1990s survey – the representation of students of ethnic minorities in applications and admissions doubled their population size as a whole (Modood, 1993). However it is worth noting that access to universities is confined to a small proportion of academically able and highly motivated students among ethnic minorities and the working class; and that they tend to be concentrated in newer and less prestigious institutions (Scott, 2001).

The diversity of the student body has challenged British HEIs to meet the demands of this ‘marginal’ group of students. Institutions of higher education are required to become ‘much more open, flexible and responsive to the different circumstances and

motivations of the much more heterogeneous student body' (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). Changes have been made in educational practice in many UK HEIs in relation to modes of attendance, modes of delivery, and programme structures to accommodate the specific needs of the non-traditional students. For instance provisions of part-time study mode, accreditation of prior learning, credit transfer, implementation of a virtual learning environment, and modular programmes have been made available in many British HEIs. Nonetheless a literature review on widening participation research conducted by Gorard *et al.* (2006) unveiled little evidence that teaching approaches are being adapted for diverse learners.

A student/learner-centred approach has been promoted as a desirable pedagogical practice in British HEIs to meet the changing role of students in higher education (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001). In a student-centred learning environment an individual learner takes the initiative in his/her learning. A combination of student-centred and teacher-centred approaches is in operation in many British HEIs. For instance studies of some disciplines in many universities are organised into lectures, seminars and tutorials. Active learning techniques are promoted in a student-centred learning environment whereby students participate in class debates/discussions, cooperative/collaborative activities in groups, present their work/project to the class, and where learning technologies are used, to name but a few (Lammers & Murphy, 2002). International students who are not accustomed to the student-centred learning environment might find it difficult to cope with.

### ***Internationalisation of higher education***

The increase in numbers of international students studying in UK takes place in an international climate of dynamic globalization and internationalization. Internationalisation of higher education is regarded as one of the reactions that a country takes to respond to the impact of globalization, while respecting the individuality of the nation (Zha, 2003). A number of rationales for the internationalisation of higher education have been identified and categorized primarily as political, social/cultural, academic and economic reasons (Altbach & Knight, 2006; De Wit, 2002; Zha, 2003). In UK the internationalisation of higher education has been driven by economic benefits. Since the election of Margaret

Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 the UK HEIs have been under pressure from funding constraints. The promotion of free market principles, tightened public funding on higher education and the increasing emphasis on public accountability and quality control in conjunction with enduring debates on the idea and function of a university and its changing priorities (Thomas, 2002) have all pushed the UK institutions of higher education to seek alternative sources of funding nationally and internationally. International non-EU students have become an important source of income for many British HEIs. It was reported that a total of £4bn fees were paid by international students in 2004 and a similar amount of money was spent on living expenses (Macleod, 2006).

One manifestation of this trend is the internationalisation of the student body. As the second largest English-speaking destination country for international HEI students, Britain continues to attract a large number of students from across the world. The total number of international students enrolled in British HEIs in the 2006/7 academic year was 239,210 (HESA, 2008), compared with 582,984 in the USA (Open Doors, 2007) and 171,246 in Australia (AEI, 2007). HEAS statistics show an increase of 7% in international students (non-UK domiciled) from 2005/6 to 2006/7 (BBC, 2008). According to recent UCAS statistics, international applications rose nearly 8%, which anticipates a further increase in numbers of international students in UK to exceed the previous count of 385,000 (Hodges, 2008). International students were reported to have made up 15 % of the total student population of 2006/7, 11% of all first degree students, 41% of all taught postgraduates and 42% of all research students (UKCISA, 2008). It must be pointed out that internationalisation of higher education is not a British phenomenon, and instead it is an international trend.

British HEIs have been driven to meet the needs and expectations of the diverse student body with multicultural backgrounds and different educational experiences. The HEIs are challenged to develop and adopt internationalisation policies and strategies in a number of aspects of educational provision. Knight (1994) has proposed a typology of generic approaches to internationalisation for higher educational institutions to implement at institutional level (Table 2.2).

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Description</b>
Activity	Categories or types of activities used to describe internationalisation: such as curriculum, student/faculty exchanges, technical assistance, international students
Competency	Development of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values in students, faculty and staff. As the emphasis on outcomes of education grows there is increasing interest in identifying and defining global/international competencies
Ethos	Emphasis is on creating a culture or climate on campus which promotes and supports international/intercultural initiatives
Process	Integration or infusion of an international or intercultural dimension into teaching, research and service through a combination of a wide range of activities, policies and procedures

Table 2.2: Approaches to internationalisation

These four approaches to internationalisation place emphasis on differing aspects of internationalisation. They are different in orientation but complement each other as Knight (1999) suggested. Defining internationalisation may vary with differing orientations. Here the internationalisation of higher education is understood as a process of integrating ‘an international dimension into the teaching, research and service function of higher education’ (Knight, 1994).

Knight (2003) has grouped internationalisation of HE into internationalization ‘at home’ and internationalisation ‘abroad’. Internationalisation ‘at home’ involves internationalisation of curriculum, learning and teaching processes, extra-curricular activities and liaison with local cultural/ethnic groups; internationalisation ‘abroad’ includes movement of people, delivery of programmes, providers’ mobility and international projects. Table 2.3 details activities under each group.

The internationalisation of the curriculum and pedagogical approaches are of the essence in the process of the internationalization of higher education. The problem with the curriculum internationalisation in UK HEIs has been the sheer emphasis on the incorporation of an international dimension into curricular content through the infusion approach; the infusion approach to curriculum internationalisation is regarded as inadequate, with its ‘ethnocentric western pedagogy and emphasis on content-based knowledge’ (De Vita & Case, 2003, p.394).

Internationalisation ‘at home’	Internationalisation ‘abroad’
<p><b>Cross-border Education Curriculum and programmes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-new programmes with international theme</li> <li>-infused international, cultural, global or comparative dimension into existing courses</li> <li>-foreign language study</li> <li>-area or regional studies</li> <li>-joint or double degrees</li> </ul>	<p><b>Movement of people</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-students on award-based programmes through semester/year abroad, internship or research programmes, or full programme abroad</li> <li>- professors/scholars and experts for purposes of teaching and research, technical assistance and consulting, sabbaticals and professional development</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teaching/learning process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-active involvement of international students, returned study abroad students and cultural diversity of classroom in teaching/learning process</li> <li>-virtual student mobility for joint courses and research projects</li> <li>-use of international scholars and teachers and local international/intercultural experts</li> <li>-integration of international, intercultural case studies, role plays, reference materials</li> </ul>	<p><b>Delivery of programmes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-programme/course moves not the student</li> <li>- includes educational or training programmes offered through a linkage or partnership arrangement between international/foreign and domestic institutions/providers.</li> <li>-credit or award is normally granted by the receiving partner/country and in some cases could be a joint or double degree. (If a foreign degree is involved then mobility of provider is applicable.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Extra-curricular activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-student clubs and associations</li> <li>-international and intercultural campus events</li> <li>-liaison with community based cultural and ethnic groups</li> <li>-peer support groups and programmes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mobility of Providers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-institution/provider moves to have physical or virtual presence in the receiving country</li> <li>-foreign or international provider has academic responsibility for the programme and awards a foreign degree. The provider may or may not have an academic or financial partner in the receiving country</li> <li>-branch campuses, stand alone foreign institutions, some franchise models are example</li> </ul>
<p><b>Liaison with local cultural/ethnic groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-involvement of students in local cultural and ethnic organizations through internships, placements and applied research</li> <li>- involvement of representatives from local cultural and ethnic groups in teaching/ learning activities, research initiatives and extracurricular events and projects</li> </ul>	<p><b>International Projects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-includes a wide diversity of non-award based activities such as joint curriculum development, research, bench marking, technical assistance, e-learning platforms, professional development and other capacity building initiatives</li> <li>-projects and services could be undertaken as part of development aid projects, academic linkages and commercial contracts.</li> </ul>

Table 2.3: Analysis of International ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ Education Categories (Knight, 2003)

Content is only one aspect of internationalising the curriculum; it also involves internationalising a number of areas of teaching and learning as identified by Leask (2005), including outcomes, assessment, content, learning environment and resources. The design of learning and teaching activities from international perspectives would facilitate curriculum internationalisation at the students' level; attention should also be drawn to the development of educators' knowledge and teaching skills with an international dimension (Leask, 2005).

According to Koutsantoni's survey (2006) of internationalisation strategies of 51 of 133 universities and colleges and study of the websites of the 133 institutions, 14 institutions (28%) have proposed internationalisation of the curriculum with the intention of embedding international perspectives into degree programmes and improving the relevance of programmes to global market needs. Only one institution wishes to learn from other pedagogical cultures and learning traditions; only four institutions would recruit international staff, and only three institutions plan to develop their staff's intercultural understanding. As far as international students are concerned, the survey (2006) shows that 14 UK HEIs intend to strengthen their international students' support mechanisms mainly including provisions of language, study skills and foundation programmes, induction programmes, improved facilities, infrastructure and student services; only two institutions plans to facilitate the integration of international students into campus life; and only two institutions recognize the importance of creating a culture of equality and diversity in their internationalisation plan.

A review of selected literature on internationalisation conducted by Caruana and Surling (2007) reveals the following three main problems with internationalisation at institutional levels: a gap between the perceived importance of global perspectives activities and the actual activity carried out, despite the existence of a multiplicity of programmes that are specifically international or global in orientation and a range of compulsory and optional taught modules within programmes with a distinct, international focus (Lunn, 2006); no guarantee that students would be prepared for understanding the breadth of sustainable development and global issues, although sustainable development and global issues are dealt with in 166 undergraduate



modules at the University of Wales (Bennel, 2005); and cross-culture learning is ignored in undergraduate programmes at Bournemouth University (Shiel, 2006).

### ***Marketisation of higher education***

British HEIs are facing huge competition to recruit students with the impact of globalisation, and internationalisation. The competition is not exclusive to British HEIs—rather it is a global phenomenon. Additionally massification of higher education, and tightened public funding on higher education is pushing HEIs further towards the market. The last couple of decades have seen an increasing association of higher education with the concept of the market. This has prompted much discussion and debate about the relation of higher education and markets, the role of government in higher education, and the future direction of higher education. A concept – marketisation prevails in today’s discourse of higher education. Marketisation policies are defined as those that are ‘aimed at strengthening student choice and liberalising markets in order to increase quality and variety of services offered by the providers of higher education’ (Jongbloed, 2003, p.113).

In the viewpoint of proponents, increased marketisation facilitates greater institutional responsiveness and adaptability to the demands of parents and students (Friedman, 1962), promotes greater innovation in teaching and research (Jongbloed, 2003), and better internal efficiency (Jongbloed, 2003; Massy, 2004). Jongbloed cites Dill and Teixeira (2000) that an economic perspective to higher education provides public benefit through stimulating academic innovation and diversity in higher education.

However, a fully market steering of higher education is detrimental on the grounds of three major factors. Brown (2009, 2008) pointed out that higher education requires public subsidy; the degree of competition between suppliers must be regulated; and the provision of the information on quality of institutions, programmes and awards is limited.

Under the circumstances of limited access to sufficient and adequate information, Brown (2009, 2008) cites McPherson and Winston’s remark that indirect or symbolic indicators of quality will be provided by suppliers and sought after by buyers; in the

perspective of higher education, too often prestige substitutes for quality. Institutional league tables play an important role in raising the profile of universities and colleges. The increasing tendency of HEIs' to seek prestige and higher rankings in the league table is said to give rise to a system which is 'less responsive, less diverse and less innovative' (Brown, 2006). The quality of higher education, it is argued, decreases in the process of institutional obtaining prestige since institutions are inclined to sacrifice provisions that help improve students' learning experience but are less contributive to reputation building (Brown, 2006). The institutional pursuit of higher ranking in the league table continues to augment the market steering of higher education.

Brown (2008) has identified a number of other potential negative impacts of increased marketisation, namely causing social stratification, threatening or reducing institutional diversity, reducing value for money and reducing overall levels of quality: Increased market-driven higher education can widen the gaps of different social and ethnic groups when one particular group of students is concentrated in the most/least prestigious institutions, which is very evident in the US. With increased market competition, institutions are likely to become homogenous since less successful institutions imitate the successful ones, which can have a detrimental effect on meeting the demands for mass higher education and widening participation. From a wider perspective, increased market competition can reduce value for money. Last but certainly not least, increased market steering of higher education can reduce overall levels of quality of learning and teaching, and students' learning experiences are compromised.

International students, as part of a diverse student body, would certainly share some of the benefits marketisation brings, but would be inevitably become a victim of the higher education market. Despite the potential limitations of league tables, for international students they still represent an indispensable reference in the process of choosing a university since these students have very limited access to information about a university and its programmes. It is more likely that in China a graduate from a top-ten university on a league table has more chances of securing well-paid employment than the one from less prestigious universities. Also in China parents of

prospective students would certainly send their children to higher ranking and prestigious universities if they can afford to do so.

Students in some prestigious HEIs might find their experience compromised and may be disappointed by the gap between expectations and the real experience, or otherwise. The Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website provides prospective students with instant access to information on the quality of a university in UK with variables including the number of students, entry information, job prospects, student satisfaction, student types and sub-attributes under each variable. A comparison of a random subject and university of contrasted ranking via the TQI reveals the university with the lower ranking excels in students' satisfaction rating. So the league table may not be the only source of reference when choosing a university and the TQI might be widely publicized among international students as one of the kind. However, before going further to promote the TQI and divert students' attention from symbolic indicators of quality, the mind-set which is fostered by the market competition first needs changing.

### **International students' overall experience in the UK**

With the increasing numbers of financial benefits contributed by international students, UK HEIs are challenged to meet their needs and expectations. Much research on international students has been market-driven, with a focus on recruitment strategies, and students' satisfaction, aiming to increase the numbers of international students studying in UK. This is understandable on the grounds that international students are considered an important source of revenue, and that competition among western universities has been triggered by globalization and internationalization. Little funded research was undertaken during the 1990s and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century on international students in UK since this topic tended not to attract research proposals and/or funding from government-funded bodies and other major research funding bodies (Leonard *et al.*, 2003). Some research has been dedicated to studies on international students' experience in UK HEIs in relation to the cultural adjustment and adaptation, academic experience, academic performance, and social life of international students. Such research was primarily conducted by individual

researchers, Masters and PhD students, and such organizations as the UKCOSA and the British Council.

UKCOSA (2004: 14) has criticized the government policy towards international students, arguing that they have been largely ignored in education policy, and the Higher Education Act 2004 makes no reference to international students in setting out policies on fee levels, fair access and student complaints. The importance of international students as a major source of income was reflected in the PMI (Prime Minister's Initiative) of 1999, which aimed to increase the number of international students in UK HEIs. PMI 2 was launched in 2006, once again stressing the significance of recruiting international students, but also addressing the quality of international students experience – to ensure 'a positive experience' of studying in UK (British Council, 2006).

In 2004, the UKCOSA conducted a survey on international students' experiences of studying in UK. The study found respondents considered their experiences in UK were 'extremely positive.' The quality of teaching is an important aspect of academic life for international students and according to the findings, satisfaction rates were very high on the quality of lectures, seminars, and also the quality of academic support and facilities, as shown in Figure 1. The survey also concludes that East Asian students were less satisfied than students from other regions, yet with 81% being content or very content with the course overall.



Figure 2.2: International Students' Satisfaction with Academic Experience (UKCOSA, 2004)

The lower satisfaction of East Asian students might be associated with their English language proficiency, and cultural, educational differences and other difficulties. Numerous research projects have investigated academic and other difficulties international students, especially East Asian students, or Chinese students encounter in studying abroad, especially in USA, Australia, UK, Canada, and New Zealand. Recent studies have focused on academic, social and personal challenges. They run the risk of falling into what Walker (1999) labelled a 'problem approach' to the study of international students' experience, a characterisation which Leonard *et al.* (2003) endorsed.

Linguistic challenge is considered one of the major concerns to international students (e.g. Elsey, 1990; Robertson *et al.*, 2000; Sovic, 2008, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Problems with English language proficiency may hinder international Chinese students from participating in class discussion and group activities, and may affect social integration (Collins & Lim, 2004). Being unaccustomed to the social, cultural, academic, and pedagogical values and conventions of a host university may cause problems in international students' adjustment to the new learning environment (e.g. Sovic, 2008; Thorstensson, 2001; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Some research (e.g. Ridley, 2004; Sovic, 2008) identifies the difficulties international students face in comprehending the discourse and culture of a particular academic community, and recommends flexible social approaches to learning (Ridley, 2004).

Studies on how international Chinese students cope with challenges are scarce. A few PhD projects (Han, 1992; Greer, 2005; Guclu, 1993; Liang, 2004; Roongrattanakool, 1998; Tanaka, 2002) have started to explore the aspect of coping strategies international students employ to deal with the challenges they face. But of these six projects, five are set in American universities and with participants on graduate courses; one (Liang, 2004) in a Canadian university. Cross and Hitchcock (2007) at the University of Portsmouth have conducted a study on international Chinese students' perceptions of learning in UK. The study identified a number of strategies used and proposed to use by international Chinese students responding to the survey and by their lecturers, in areas like learning skills, English language proficiency, adaptation, assessment, in-class participation, and lecturers' expectations. It is hoped

that this current research project can contribute to the literature of such a subject of enquiry.

Sufficient provision of academic and pastoral support is needed to help international students adjust to new academic and cultural environment. Many British HEIs provide international students with a variety of English language courses and study skills courses including pre-sessional English for Academic Purpose courses, in-sessional English language courses for international students, General English language courses and International Foundation Programmes. As mentioned before, international students are required to demonstrate English language proficiency with a satisfactory score in IELTS and TOEFL tests. The requirement of scores varies by different subjects, courses, level of study and different HEIs. Many HE institutions offer IELTS preparation courses to meet the demands of a body of international students who choose to take IELTS in UK instead of their home country. International students can also receive academic writing and study skills support from many universities' writing centre or language centre.

Before they arrive in the UK, students are usually provided with information about pre-departure and arrival processes, induction and orientation programmes, accommodation, living and working in the UK, immigration, students' union activities, and social and cultural societies for international students. Many universities devote web pages to international students to provide all the above information. Many universities also send the necessary information to students by post. Once they have arrived on the campus, students are invited to participate in orientation programmes and get to know the university. Students have been informed at the outset that they will be supported by a dedicated team during their study at university.

A number of social networks are in place in many British HEIs such as the students' union, societies for international students, and chaplaincies where international students can socialize and make friends. International students also set up associations and societies, for instance a Chinese Students and Scholars Association, where various cultural events and activities are organized by members of the association.

Some international students take up paid part-time jobs on or off campus, and some are engaged in voluntary or charity work.

A survey conducted by UKCOSA (2007) on UK HEIs support provision for international students find that the basic range of support services for international students is available at the majority of HEIs including pre-departure information, immigration advice services, meet-and-greet services, orientation programmes, information on life in UK, career services, and social and cultural activities. However the survey uncovers a number of problems with support services of some university and has suggested areas for further improvement, as summarized below:

- The participation rate in orientation programmes remains at not much above 50%; students arriving late, or at times other than the start of term are missing out, as few (33% of institutions that responded) provide ongoing ‘on-demand’ orientation all year round. It is advised to offer follow-up sessions throughout the year to improve the effectiveness of orientation.
- Student feedback has shown the need for more activities to encourage the mixture of home and international students. Activities like budding or mentoring schemes that specifically encourage mixing are scarce.
- 51% of respondent institutions have a special hardship fund for international students, but 27% of respondent institutions have no designated hardship fund for international students. Fixing of tuition fees for the full duration of the course is also recommended to be a common practice as some universities have yet to realize the benefits.
- Representative structures for international students are not well-developed: there is only a small number of elected part-time and full-time international student officers in Students’ Unions, and international student committees are yet to be universalized. Awareness of the above issues is low.
- There is an absence of correlation between the number of international students and the number of international student advisers. International support services should increase in line with numbers of students; or provision for international students should be integrated into mainstream services (UKCOSA, 2007).

There is room for improvement, and services currently unavailable for international students in some universities are in urgent need. The findings of the survey provide institutions with a benchmark to assess their provision for international students with an ultimate aim for best student experience. The survey only provides benchmarking for the extent of provision; as it suggested, it is essential for institutions to assess the quality of provision, for which student feedback is an importance source of information (UKCOSA, 2007). A new survey of students' academic experience is indeed required to assess academic quality and academic support provision for international students, to see if the satisfactory rates are still as high as in 2004 – this leads us through to issues of cultural and linguistic adaptation that is the central theme of the following chapter.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the context of destination – UK HEIs. British higher education is internationally well-known for its academic excellence in teaching and learning, and research, which attracts an influx of students from around the world. There is a wide range of HEIs in which international students can choose to study, from old medieval universities (e.g. Oxbridge), through civic universities (e.g. Liverpool) and 1960s plate glass (e.g. Lancaster), and to the new universities of post-1992 (e.g. Greenwich) and the newest universities (e.g. Liverpool Hope).

Although having individual characteristics, each UK HEI is shaped by the wider higher educational environment. The massification and internationalization of higher education have led to an increasingly diverse study body with different social, cultural and educational backgrounds. UK HEIs need constantly to adapt to this change institutionally and pedagogically. The marketisation of higher education can be seen as an institutional response towards growing globalisation of the economy and internationalization of higher education. It is imperative for HEIs to avoid developing towards extreme marketisation compromising the institutional diversity, the quality of learning and teaching, and widening social gaps (Brown, 2008).

A brief review of the literature on international students' experience in UK has identified that international students, especially Chinese international students, are



challenged linguistically and culturally during their study in UK. Problems may be caused by inadequate language proficiency, and unfamiliarity with the codes and conventions of UK higher education and with the social and cultural environment.

It is necessary to look into the literature relating to the international students' adaptation to the new learning environment, which is investigated in the next chapter and which will provide an analytical framework for data analysis in this research.

## **CHAPTER 3 – CONTEXTS OF LEARNING**

### **Introduction**

Home students find the transition to higher education taxing until they become accustomed to academic language and conventions, independent learning and class participation ... However, international students must deal with all these things and more: they face different social and cultural mores and customs, norms and values from the ones they have known; different modes of teaching and learning; and different expectations and conventions about participation and performance (Ryan & Carroll, 2005, p.5).

Studying at tertiary level is challenging, and studying in higher educational institutions in a different cultural and learning context from their own is even more challenging. International students studying at UK HEIs need to adapt to a new culture and learning environment. Inevitably in the process of adaptation, international students encounter a number of challenges and difficulties in relation to socio-cultural, academic and psychological aspects, which they must find solutions in order to cope.

This chapter provides a literature review on acculturation: what is acculturation, phases of acculturation, and specific details within each phase, as well as challenges identified by current research on international students cultural adjustment. Academic adaptation is explored to identify academic challenges that international students encounter in adapting to a new learning environment.

### **Adapting to a new cultural environment**

International students need to adjust to a different culture when they are studying abroad. During the course of adjustment, they respond to cultural influences with different attitudes and behaviours. They are undergoing a process of acculturation, which is understood by anthropologists as:

those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield *et al.*, 1936, p.149).

From the perspectives of psychologists, acculturation refers to ‘the psychological changes and eventual outcomes that occur as a result of individuals experiencing acculturation’ (Berry, 1997, p.6). Compared with emphasis placed by anthropologists on group-level phenomena, psychologists stress individual changes. Four modes of acculturation was identified: a) *integration*, whereby individuals are interested in both maintaining one’s original culture and in daily interactions with host culture; b) *assimilation*, which means that individuals are interested in seeking daily interaction with host culture but not in maintaining one’s own culture; c) *separation*, where individuals place a high value on holding onto and developing one’s original culture while avoid interaction with host culture; d) *marginalization*, which occurs when individuals show no interest in mainlining original culture and interacting with host culture (Berry *et al.*, 1987).

Individuals’ preference towards the above four modes of acculturation may vary. Accordingly four types of acculturation strategies occur depending on the context and time period; they are *integration/bicultural*, *assimilation*, *separation/withdrawal*, and *marginalization/alienation* (Berry, 2003, 1997; Coatsworth *et al.*, 2005).

Acculturation theory is also associated with the concept of *acculturative stress* (Berry & Annis, 1974; Berry *et al.*, 1987), which is defined as ‘a reduction in health status (including psychological, somatic and social aspects) of individuals who are undergoing acculturation’ (Berry *et al.*, 1997). Acculturative stress varies depending on the different acculturation strategies that an individual adopts. Individuals with integration preference tend to have lower acculturative stress while individuals favouring separation and marginalization experiences suffer greater stress (Berry *et al.*, 1997). Hence the integration mode is an ideal choice for *optimal* cross-cultural adjustment (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

A number of models have been proposed to conceptualize the cross-cultural adjustment/acculturation process. Lysgaard’s U-curve hypothesis represents a three-stage adjustment process comprising an initial easy honeymoon phase, then a stressful crisis phase, and eventually a successful adjustment phase of integrating into the new culture environment (Lysgaard, 1955). Sojourners thus undergo a cultural journal of up-down-up, which forms a U shape. The U-curve model is closely linked with the

length of stay in a new cultural context. Lysgaard's (1955) investigation of over 200 Norwegian Fulbright scholars reported that the crisis phase lasted 6 - 18 months of their stay in USA: those who stayed less than 6 months or more than 18 months adjusted better than those who stayed for 6 to 18 months. The model is commonly used but not all studies have confirmed the U-curve hypothesis (e.g. Anderson, 1994); Church (1982, p.542) criticized the model as 'weak, inconclusive and over generalised.' Not all sojourners start their adjustment with a honeymoon phase. Ward *et al.* (1998) suggest the rejection of the U-curve model of intercultural adjustment. The U-curve model was extended to a W-curve model with incorporation of re-entry culture shock when sojourners return home (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Brown (1980) identified four stages of acculturation which sojourners experience in adapting to a new culture: 1) a period of excitement and euphoria with the newness of the surroundings; 2) a period of culture shock as cultural differences from their own increasingly emerge; 3) a period of culture stress when some problems of adaptation are being solved while other problems are emerging; and 4) full recovery with the integration into the new culture, and self-confidence in the new culture.

Oberg's (1960) four-stage model of culture shock consists of the honeymoon stage, the crisis stage, the recovery stage, and finally the adjustment stage. Culture shock is a widely used term to describe difficulties or unpleasant experiences sojourners encounter in a new cultural environment. Furnham and Bochner (1986, p.48) citing Oberg (1960) identified six negative characteristics of culture shock:

1. Strain due to the effort required to make the necessary psychological adaptations;
2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions;
3. Being rejected by/and or rejecting members of the new culture;
4. Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity;
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

It is natural that individuals experience culture shock in the process of adjusting to a new culture. Culture shock occurs at the low point of the U-curve model, Brown's

four-stage acculturation theory, and the crisis stage of Oberg's four stage framework. But, there is dispute as to exactly when the stage of culture shock takes place (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Brown and Holloway (2008, p.234) cite Furnham (1993) in arguing that transition is best understood as a process of change that is especially stressful at first, with problems being the greatest upon arrival and decreasing as a function of various variables. Although everyone experiences culture shock, there are diverse ways individuals respond to it as part of the acculturation process. As mentioned above, four possible approaches to acculturating – integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation – might be adopted, with the condition that individuals have the freedom to choose, and the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity (Berry, 1997).

Cross-cultural adjustment can also be understood as a learning process. Some theorists (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) have proposed a culture learning model, in which cross-cultural adjustment is divided into psychological (emotional/affective) and socio-cultural (behavioural) domains. The former refers to psychological well-being or satisfaction, and can best be understood in relation to a stress and coping framework, mediated by personality variables and social support; the latter relates to the ability to *fit in* or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture, and is best explained within a social skills or culture learning paradigm (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1996, 1999). The essence of social-cultural adaptation is the acquisition of culturally appropriate skills and behaviours through the interaction with the new culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). The learning model also encourages culture adjustment through intercultural communication and interaction with the host culture. Studies have found correlations between the level of interaction with host nationals and international students' adjustment (e.g Sellitz & Cook, 1962; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Searle, 1991).

There has been an interest in research on international students' cross-cultural adjustment (Ward, 2001). Studies on international students' adjustment in a new cultural environment have reported a number of sources of challenges they encounter. Reviewing 30 years of research on international students' cultural adjustment, Church (1982) identified the major problems as including language difficulties, financial problems, homesickness, adjusting to social customs and norms, and difficulties in

making friends with host nationals. According to Furnham and Bochner (1986), citing Huang (1977), the most common areas of difficulty have been a) communication barriers (arising from unfamiliar and complex linguistic and paralinguistic features); b) shifting cultural gears (as the student is forced to move between new and old cultural values, identity and so on); c) replacing a social network of family, neighbours and friends; d) multiple accountability (to family, government or other sponsor, academic advisors and immigration officials). It is challenging for international students studying at higher education level overseas, not only they need to deal with academic difficulties, but also problems with adapting to a new culture.

Language difficulties and cultural differences have been reported as predominant issues in international students' intercultural adjustment (e.g. Andrade, 2006; Campbell & Li, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Language problems and unfamiliarity with the cultural norms of the host country might discourage international students from interacting actively with native students. Insufficient language proficiency and skills have affected international students' academic participation. Studies have reported that students' lack confidence in the linguistic competence may hinder their participation in class or seminar discussion (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson *et al.*, 2000).

The above acculturation and stages will be used in Chapter 6, 7 and 8 to assist the data analysis of the thesis. The next section discusses international students' academic adaptation in a new learning environment in terms of learning styles, academic writing and teaching, learning and assessment.

## **Academic adaptation in a new learning environment**

### ***Learning styles***

Over the last five decades a multitude of empirical research and studies have been conducted to investigate learning styles, which generated a host of concepts, definitions, constructs, theoretical models, instruments and measurement. The area of learning styles is a complex and diverse field of research. Originating from the discipline of psychology, the study of learning styles is now conducted across a wide

range of disciplines and areas. The multidisciplinary nature of the research of learning styles has rendered the subject 'fragmented', 'disparate,' complicated and intricate' (Cassidy, 2004, p.419). Adding to the complexity is various interpretations of the concept of learning style. Very often the term is used interchangeably with the term 'cognitive style', and approaches to learning. In this thesis, learning styles are used interchangeably with approaches to learning and learning strategies. Keefe (1988) has defined learning styles as a set of cognitive, affective, and physiologic behaviours, which serve as relatively stable indicators of how students understand, interact with and respond to the learning environment.

Learning styles characterize how students learn, and ways students prefer to learn. Students choose different approaches to learning depending on their individual preferences and different learning environments. Kolb understands that learning styles are not 'fixed traits' (1981, p.291), but 'differential preference for learning, which changes slightly from situation to situation' (2000, p.8). He (2000) also claims there is lasting stability in learning style, which, Coffield *et al.* (2004) points out, needs further investigation. According to Kolb (1981, 290), learning styles stand for 'preferences for one mode of adaptation over the others; but these preferences do not operate to the exclusion of other adaptive modes and will vary from time to time and situation to situation.' This definition emphasizes the 'variability' (Kolb, 1981, p.290) in individual approaches to learning.

From the cognitive psychologist's perspective, learning styles are seen as 'generalised habits of thought, not simply the tendency towards specific acts ... but rather the enduring structural basis for such behaviour' (Messick, 1984, p.61). As a result, learning styles are associated with individuals' personality features, abilities, and habitual approaches to learning (Coffield *et al.*, 2004). For the cognitive psychologist, learning styles are understood as 'bipolar constructs,' such as field dependence and field independence (Witkin, 1962; Witkin *et al.*, 1977), and holist-analytic and verbal-imagery (Riding & Rayner, 1998; Riding & Cheema, 1991).

Unlike some of theorists' understanding of the changeability of students' learning styles, a group of theorists (e.g. Dunn & Dunn, 1992) regard learning styles as 'constitutionally based and relatively fixed'. Dunn and Dunn define learning style as

‘the way in which individuals begins to concentrate on, process, internalise and retain new and difficult academic information’ (Dunn & Dunn, 1992), and ‘a biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics ...’ (Dunn & Griggs, 1988, p.3). Thus Dunn and Dunn’s learning model stresses the impact of individuals’ biological and genetic characteristics on their learning styles.

Learning styles also refer to approaches to learning (Schmeck, 1988). Vermunt (1996, p.29) defines learning style as ‘a coherent whole of learning activities that students usually employ, their learning orientation and their mental model of learning.’ Learning style is ‘not conceived of as an unchangeable personality attribute, but as the result of the temporal interplay between personal and contextual influences’ (Vermunt, 1996, p.29). This shows an appreciation of the impact of the learning environment on approaches to learning. According to Entwistle (2001), approaches to learning are affected by the content and context of the task in a particular situation since students’ learning is reactive to the learning context. And Pask (1976) cited Lynch (1960) and Glanville (1974) in arguing that styles are shaped by the way students explore, learn about, and perceive the learning environment. Pask (1976) and Entwistle (1991) differentiate learning styles from learning strategies. Learning strategies are defined as ‘the preferences shown in tackling an individual task,’ while, in contrast, learning styles are ‘general preferences more akin to the psychological term cognitive style with its implications of relatively stable behaviour patterns rooted in personality differences or cerebral dominance’ (Entwistle, 1991, p.201).

There are at least 71 models of learning styles (Coffield *et al.*, 2004). Some researchers have attempted to categorise different models of learning styles: for instance Curry (1983, 1987)’s onion model of learning styles – cognitive personality style, information processing style and instructional preference. Coffield *et al.* (2004) designed a continuum of learning styles, which groups 71 models of learning styles into 5 categories as shown in Figure 3.1. The continuum is based on the extent to which the theorists of learning styles models regard the learning styles as fixed traits. Coffield *et al.* (2004) explained that at the left-hand end of the continuum, there is a cluster of theorists with strong beliefs on the genetic determination of learning styles; moving along the continuum towards the right-hand end, there is the recognition of changeability of learning styles, and the interaction of learners and contextual



settings; when reaching the end of the continuum greater emphasis is given by the theorists on the influence of prior experiences and contextual factors on learning styles and approaches/strategies students choose to employ. Coffield *et al.* (2004) also point out the limitations of their grouping of the learning styles: overemphasising the differences of each cluster of the learning style models; or placing a learning model in one group while it may appear belong to another group.

Given the large amount of learning style models and theories, this chapter does not intend to provide a comprehensive review of all the learning style models existing in the literature. Learning styles as learning preferences and as learning approaches/strategies are investigated in this section, with an evaluation of some key learning models of each category. The selection is based on three criteria: a) the taxonomies of Kolb (2000) and Honey and Mumford's (1992) learning styles models, identified within the group of learning preferences, are widely known and employed in the UK; b) some western conceptions of Chinese learners are associated with the learning models of the learning approaches/strategies category; c) the characteristics of the group of learning approaches/strategies, underlining the interplay of learners and contextual aspects of learning, would provide excellent theoretical groundings for the research.

#### *Learning preferences – Taxonomies of Kolb's, Honey and Mumford's learning styles*

As mentioned above, learning styles are perceived by Kolb and his proponents as differential learning preferences, to some extent varying with situations, and with some long-term stability (Kolb 2000). Kolb (2000) states that learners will demonstrate distinct preferences for some learning experiences, but not others.

Kolb's renowned experiential learning theory (ELT) is regarded as the inauguration of the modern learning styles movement (Coffield *et al.*, 2004). Kolb's ELT defines learning in relation to process and emphasizes the importance of experience in the learning process.

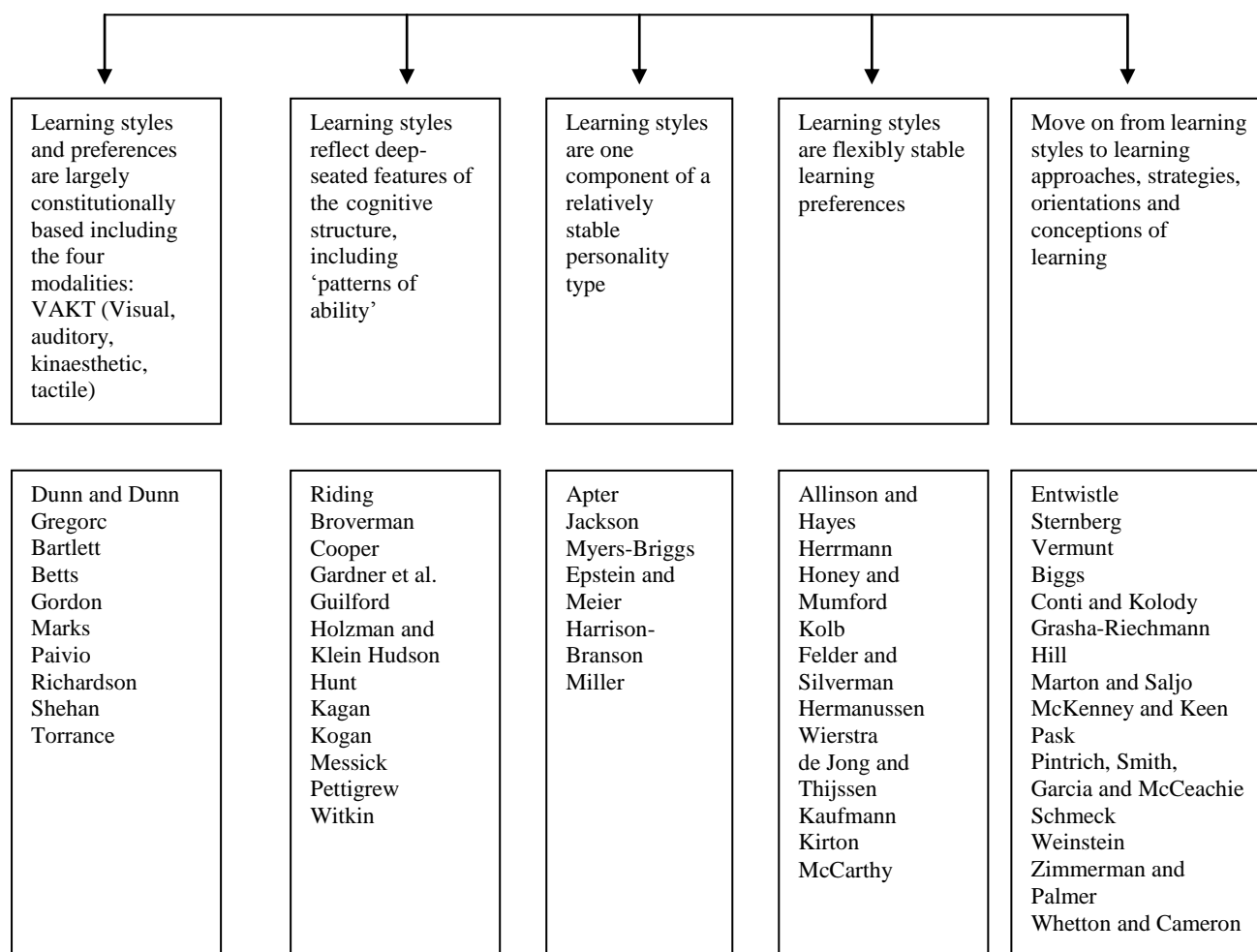


Figure 3.1: Continuum of Learning Styles (Coffield *et al.*, 2004)

According to Kolb (1984, p.41), 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'; learning is a continuous and integrated process of 'grasping experience and transforming it'; and learning involves resolving conflicts at four stages of the learning cycle – concrete experiences (CE; experiencing), reflective observation (RO; reflecting), abstract conceptualisation (AC; thinking and forming abstract concepts based on experiences and reflections), and active experimentation (AE; active testing of new implications of the concepts in new situations). It is an integrated and incessant cycle of learning from CE, RO, AC, to AE. According to Kolb (1984) learners will show preferences for a certain stage and develop learning styles emphasizing some learning abilities over others. As shown in Figure xx, the four abilities form two independent bipolar dimensions – CE v.s. AC; AE v.s. RO. The dimension of CE – AC represents the tension between relying on immediate experience (apprehension) or on conceptual interpretation

(comprehension) in order to grasp experience; the dimension of AE – RO represents the tension between relying on external manipulation (extension) or internal reflection (intention) in order to transform experience (Coffield *et al.*, 2004).

Based on the conceptual framework of experiential learning theory, Kolb (2000) has identified four learning styles – diverging, converging, accommodating and assimilating. These four learning styles are relatively situated in each quadrant of the learning cycle, as shown in Figure 3.2.

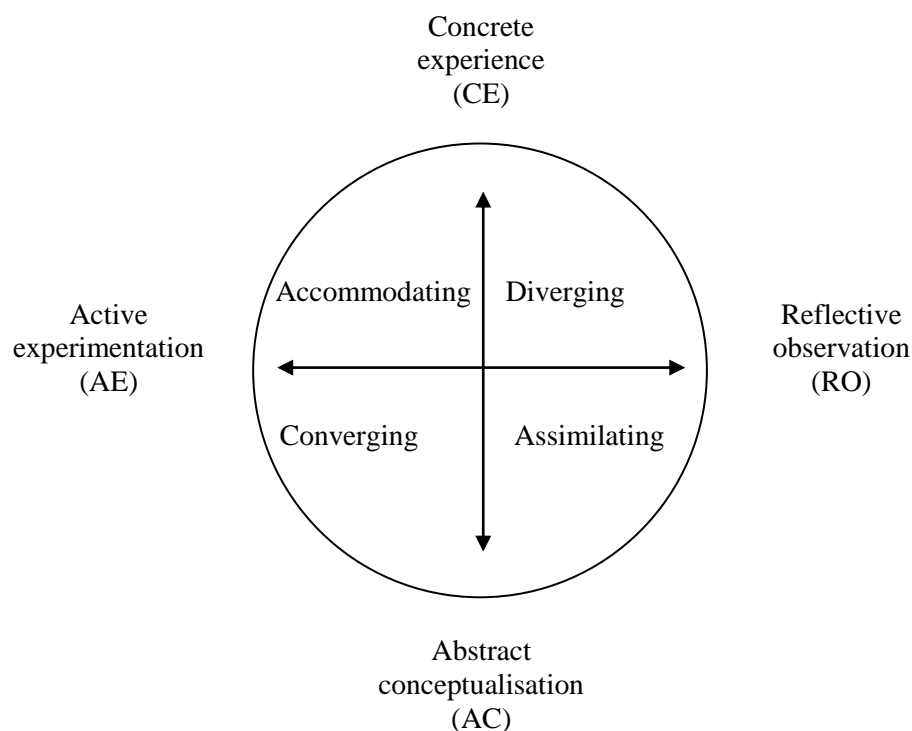


Figure3.2: Kolb's four learning styles (Coffield *et al.*, 2004)

Figure 3.2 shows a convergent learner prefers abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, and excels in problem solving and decision making; in contrast a divergent learner prefers concrete experience and reflective observation, and is imaginative and creative; an accommodative learner uses concrete experience and active experimentation, and is pragmatic and intuitive, good at doing things and adapting to diverse situations (Lynch *et al.* 1998); on the contrary an assimilative learner concentrates on developing theories by reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, and is more concerned with ideas being logically sound than practical (Coffield *et al.*, 2004).

The Learning Style Inventory (LSI)<sup>11</sup> was designed to assess individual's learning styles against four learning stages of the learning cycle, categorizing the learning styles. However, Coffield *et al.* (2004)'s literature review shows that there is a continuing conflict over the reliability and validity of Kolb's learning theory and the LSI among its proponents and opponents: there are empirical studies that testified to the reliability and validity of the LSI (e.g. Marshall & Merritt, 1986; Heffler, 2001) while others (e.g. Wilson, 1986; Newstead, 1992; Lam, 1997) criticised the test-retest reliability of the LSI. Some empirical studies conclude with mixed results (e.g. Geiger & Pinto, 1991, 1992).

Based on Kolb's learning style theory, Honey and Mumford (1992, 2000) identified four learning styles (activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists) by using the Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ). These four learning styles are analogous to Kolb's four learning stages: activists to Kolb's CE; reflectors to RO; theorists to AC; and pragmatists to AE. Honey and Mumford's four learning styles constitute a four-stage-learning cycle, as shown in Figure 3.3, reflecting Kolb's (2000).

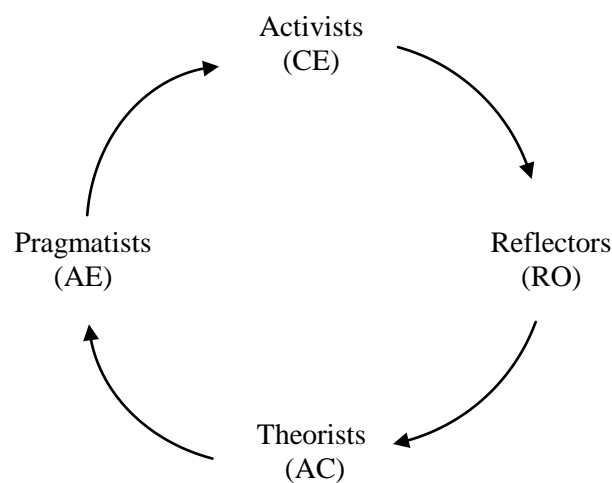


Figure 3.3: Honey and Mumford's learning cycle (Coffield *et al.*, 2004)

According to Honey and Mumford (2000) an ideal learner should be competent in all four stages and have the abilities characteristic of the four stages. A brief summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each learning style is shown in Table 3.1. All four styles are 'non-pejorative' (Sadler-Smith, 1996, p.32) and 'no single style has an

<sup>11</sup> The first of version of the LSI was developed in 1976, the second in 1985, the third in 1999 and revised in 2005.

overwhelming advantage over any other. Each has strengths and weaknesses' (Honey and Mumford 2000, p.43). In addition to learning styles, Coffield *et al.* (2004) point out that Honey and Mumford also acknowledge the importance of other factors affecting learning, such as prior learning experiences, learning opportunities, cultural and learning environment and pedagogical impact.

The face validity of the LSQ is claimed by Honey and Mumford, as Coffield *et al.* (2004) cite, but there is no other type of validity that has been assessed. Some studies (e.g. Allinson & Hayes 1988; Sims *et al.*, 1989; Tepper *et al.*, 1993; Jackson & Lawty-Jones, 1996; De Ciantis & Kirton, 1996) have confirmed the moderate internal consistency reliability. Duff and Duffy (2002)'s study has testified against the suggestion that Honey and Mumford's LSQ is an alternative for Kolb's LSI since exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis failed to support the existence of the two bipolar dimensions and four learning styles proposed by Honey and Mumford. Their study (2002) also concludes that the LSQ is not suitable for use in applied research in HE.

#### *Approaches to Learning – Biggs' Taxonomies, Entwistle's learning styles*

Unlike other theorists of learning styles, theorists of this group consider learning styles from the perspective of how an individual approaches or tackles a specific learning task. They introduced the concepts of learning strategy and approaches to learning. As mentioned earlier, a learning style is general preference associated with cognitive style; in contrast, a learning strategy is the way in which students choose to deal with a specific learning task (Entwistle *et al.*, 1979). This group of theorists stress the interplay between learners, contextual environments, and the learning task.

Marton and Saljo (1976) identified two different levels of processing by investigating students' reading of academic articles – deep level processing and surface level processing. Later level of processing was replaced by the concept of approach to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1997).

<i>Style</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<b>Activists</b>	Flexible and open-minded; Ready to take action; Like to be exposed to new situations; Optimistic about anything new and therefore unlikely to resist change	Tendency to take the immediately obvious action without thinking through possible consequences; Often take unnecessary risks; Tendency to do too much themselves and to hog the limelight; Rush into action without sufficient preparation; Get bored with implementation/consolidation/follow through
<b>Reflectors</b>	Careful; Thorough and methodical; Thoughtful; Good at listening to others and assimilating information; Rarely jump to conclusions	Tendency to hold back from direct participation; Slow to make up their minds and reach a decision; Tendency to be too cautious and not take enough risks; Not assertive; not particularly forthcoming and have no 'small talk'
<b>Theorists</b>	Logical, 'vertical' thinkers; Rational and objective; Good at asking probing questions; Disciplined approach; Grasp of the 'big picture'	Restricted in lateral thinking; Low tolerance for uncertainty, disorder and ambiguity; Intolerant of anything subjective or intuitive; Full of 'shoulds, oughts and musts'
<b>Pragmatists</b>	Eager to test things out in practice; Practical, down to earth, realistic; Businesslike – get straight to the point; Technique-oriented	Tendency to reject anything without an obvious application; Not very interested in theory or basic principles; Tendency to seize on the first expedient solution to a problem; Impatient with indecision; More task-oriented than people-oriented

Table 3.1: Strengths and weaknesses of Honey and Mumford (2000)'s learning styles (Coffield *et al.*, 2004)

According to Marton and Saljo (1997), students using a deep approach initiate an active dialogue with the learning materials, trying to understand the meaning of the text by looking for the relations within the text, between the text and phenomena of the real world, between the text and its underlying structure; in contrast students adopting a surface approach have a tendency to memorise the facts in the text with the intention of being assessed. A third approach was added to the category – the strategic

approach – by Biggs. The strategic approach is employed by students to obtain high marks in assessment. The most prominent single characteristic of students adopting the strategic approach is the ability to adapt, in a positive way, to the demands made by the context of learning (Ramsden, 1979). Students using the strategic approach tend to put a lot of effort in organizing study, managing time, obtaining appropriate resources and conditions for successful study, ensuring the successful completion of an assignment (Biggs, 1979; Coffeld *et al.*, 2004; Entwistle, 2001; Sadler-Smith, 1997).

Contrasting features of different approaches to learning are summarized in Table 3.2:

Approach	Intention	Methods
<b>Deep approach</b>	To understand ideas for yourself	Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience; Looking for patterns and underlying principles; Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions; Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically; Being aware of understanding, developing while learning; Becoming actively interested in the course content
<b>Surface approach</b>	To cope with course requirements	Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge; Memorising facts and carrying out procedures routinely; Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented; Seeing little value or meaning in either courses or tasks set; Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy; Feeling undue pressure and worry about work
<b>Strategic approach</b>	To achieve the highest possible grades	Putting consistent effort into studying; Managing time and effort effectively; Finding the right conditions and materials for studying; Monitoring the effectiveness of ways of studying; Being alert to assessment requirements and criteria; Gearing work to the perceived preferences of lecturers.

Table 3.2: defining features of approaches to learning (Entwistle *et al.*, 2001)

As shown in the table, the three approaches to learning are associated with three distinct intentions and motivators: deep approach learners tend to be motivated by intrinsic factors (understanding the meaning of the materials); the learner with a surface approach is motivated by extrinsic factor (meeting course requirements); and the learner with a strategic approach is motivated by the successful completion of assessment task with the highest possible marks. Students' selection of approaches to

learning / learning strategies is to a certain degree influenced by their intentions / motivations of learning. Students' choice of approaches is closely correlated with how students perceive the context and the content of the task.

Likewise, Biggs' work (e.g. 1976, 1979, 1987, and 1993) emphasizes the importance of interrelations between the teaching context, student factors, and learning outcomes in student learning process. A 3P model was devised to illustrate the relations, as shown in Figure 3.4. In this model, mutual interactions of student factors, teaching context, learning-focused activities and learning outcomes form an integrated and dynamic system: approaches to learning form an important component of the 3P model; they interact with presage factors and together determine the learning outcomes; reversible arrows shows that each factor affects every other factor (Biggs *et al.*, 2001). Students' choice of approaches to learning interacts with their perceptions of learning context.

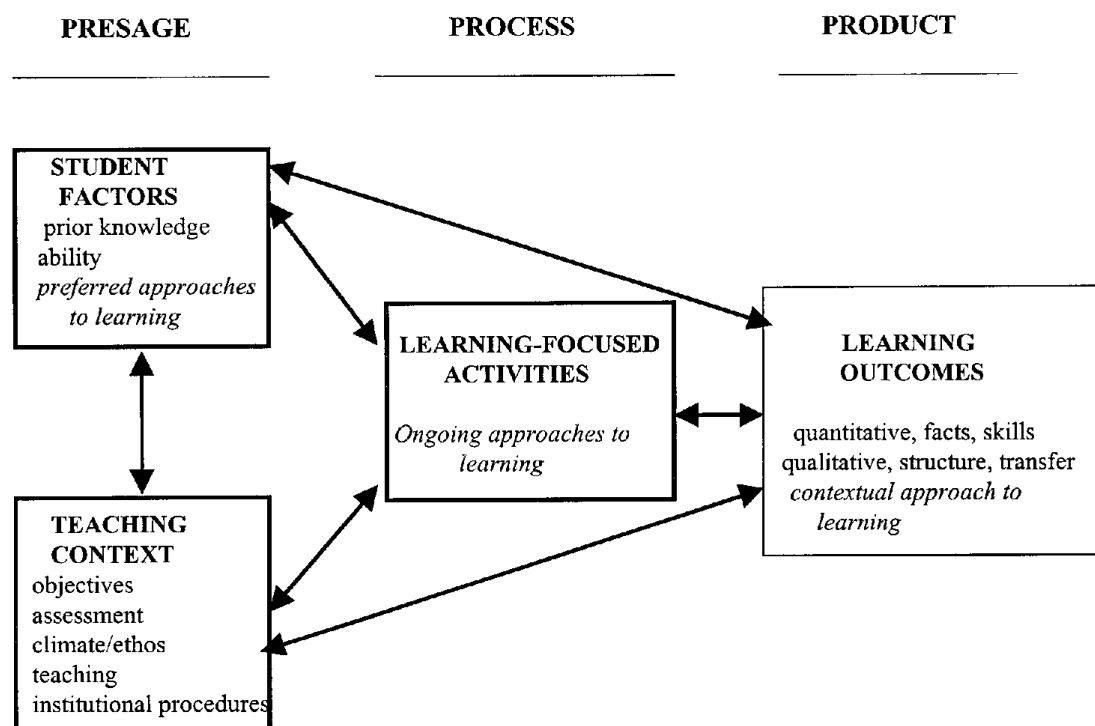


Figure 3.4: The 3P model of teaching and learning (Biggs *et al.*, 2001)

Biggs (1976) developed an inventory – the Study Behaviour Questionnaire (SBQ) – to identify and measure learning approaches in tertiary level education. The revised



version of the SBQ inventory – Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) – distinguished three dimensions of study process as utilising, internalising and achieving (Biggs 1979). According to Biggs (1979) each dimensions incorporate a cognitive (strategic) and affective (motivational) component. In other words, students’ motives influence their approaches to learning. The utilising factor stresses rote learning, memorization, and reproduction of learning materials, with extrinsic motives such as pragmatic reasons for learning (e.g. to obtain a better job), and avoiding failure; the internalising factor emphasizes the understanding of the meaning by investigating inter-relations of the learning materials, with intrinsic motives like personal satisfaction; and the achieving factor highlights cognitive strategies of organizing study, managing time, gathering sufficient learning materials and ensuring the completion of assignments, with achieving motives as higher marks and excellence (Biggs, 1979). Apparently there are correspondences between these three factors and characteristics of surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning.

Based on the work by Pask (1976), Marton and Saljo (1976) and Biggs (1976), Entwistle and his colleagues (1979) developed an inventory for evaluating students’ approaches to learning. Over the years five version of the inventory have been developed: the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) (1981); the Course Perception Questionnaire (CPQ) (1981); the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory (RASI) (1995); the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) (1997); and the Approaches to Learning and Studying Inventory (ALSI). ASSIST, a 52-item inventory, describes approaches to learning as deep, strategic and surface apathetic approaches. Meta-cognition and self-regulation are included in the strategic approach. The characteristics of three approaches are summarized as:

- Deep approach – seeking meaning, relating ideas, use of evidence, interest in ideas and monitoring understanding
- Strategic approach – organised studying, time management, alertness to assessment demands, Achieving, and monitoring effectiveness
- Surface apathetic approach – lack of purpose, unrelated memorising, syllabus-bound focus on minimum requirements, and fear of failure (ELT, 2005)

An evaluation of the ASSIST has confirmed the satisfactory results of reliability, validity and internal consistency (ELT 2005; Coffield *et al.*, 2004). Haggis (2003) has

criticized that the model of deep, strategic and surface approaches is invalid in the ever-changing HE situations, and the assumptions of academic values, goals, students' aims, beliefs and motivations underpinned by the model are failing to address today's complex HE contexts – mass higher education, diversity of student body, and widening participation. Haggis (2003) has also touched up cultural dimensions of the concepts of the learning approach model, which is to be discussed in the following section, by arguing the deficiencies of the model in different cultural contexts.

### *Approaches to learning: a cultural perspective*

Significant investigation of learning styles across cultures started in the 1980s in the USA, driven by teachers of English to speakers of other languages (Littrell, 2005). Learning styles differ across cultures. Oxford and Anderson (1995) have argued that learning styles and learning strategies have a strong cultural component. A number of studies have been reviewed by Oxford and Anderson (1995) to attest to the claim of cultural influences on learning styles. References are made to literature in their review to show the importance of cultural dimensions of learning styles. It must be pointed out that the majority of studies were on second language / English language learning styles. Nonetheless these studies can also reflect learning styles in general.

‘Although culture is not the single determinant ... many other influences intervene, culture often does play a significant role in the learning styles’ Oxford *et al.* (1992, p.441). To understand the effects of learning styles, Oxford and Anderson (1995, 203) quoted Merriam and Caffarella (1991, p.178), one ‘must consider the impact of the family, the educational system, and the culture on what we know and how we come to know it.’ Likewise Singleton (1991, p.120) suggested ‘There are, in every society, unstated assumptions about people and how they learn ... [which] act as a kind of unintentional hidden curriculum, or what an anthropologist might call a cultural theory of learning.’ A number of empirical studies also demonstrated the significance of cultural impact on learning styles. For instance, Giggs and Dunn (1989) confirmed the cultural background influences students' style preferences.

The concepts and constructs of approaches to learning have been developed by theorists conducting studies in western countries like Entwistle in the UK and Biggs in Australia. The generalization of surface and deep approaches to learning applicable to all learning contexts ignores the impact of cultural factors on approaches to learning. Cross-cultural scholars have questioned the validity and reliability of the models across cultures, and a number of empirical studies have been carried out to investigate the consistency and variability of the model in different cultural contexts. The research results are generally supportive of the cross-cultural reliability and validity of approaches to learning instruments and their underlying model (Watkins, 1996).

However, there are research findings that challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of surface and deep approaches (Haggis, 2003). As understood by the theorists of approaches to learning, memorising, rote learning and material-focused are the characteristics of surface learning approaches; in contrast seeking to understand the meaning of the materials are the norms of deep learning approaches. Also the general consensus is the surface approaches lead to poor performance while deep approaches lead to high academic achievement. However, studies with Chinese students have shown contradictory results, known as the paradox of Chinese learners (e.g. Kember, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1999). The findings (Kember, 2000) of the survey using Biggs' SPQ among Hong Kong and Australian students revealed that the Hong Kong students' mean score for the deep approach is about the same level as those in Australia and the surface approach score is lower rather than considerably higher, which challenged the conventional view of rote-learners with higher scores of surface approach. The paradox of Chinese learners is: a) Chinese learners, employing rote learning and memorisation, do considerably well in academic performance; and b) Chinese students, in 'fierce and overcrowded classrooms' outperformed Western students in high level academic tasks (Watkins & Biggs, 1999; Biggs, 1998).

The first paradox underlies the Western misunderstandings of the meanings of memorisation and understanding in Chinese cultural contexts. Two types of memorisation are identified as mechanical (i.e. rote learning) and memorising with understanding (Marton *et al.*, 1999). Chinese perception of memorisation takes the latter view, and Chinese learners and educators recognize that memorisation can occur

in conjunction with an intention to seek understanding; and that memorisation can be used to deepen and develop understanding (Marton *et al.*, 1999; Kember, 2000). Dahlin and Watkins (2000) highlighted the distinction between rote learning and repetition for deep memorising ('creating deep impression on the mind'), and argued that repetition can help deepen or develop understanding by discovering new meaning.

Some research also explored the motivational intentions of Chinese students in learning, which are associated with a deep approach to learning. The conventional view sees Chinese students as motivated by extrinsic factors of obtaining a qualification for a better job perspective, which is related to a surface approach. However, Kember's (2000) study shows that career motivation often occurred in conjunction with intrinsic motivations: students tend to expect courses to be both interesting and career relevant. The finding is also in correlation with Confucian understanding of learning as self-cultivation.

### ***Academic writing***

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) differentiate writing in academic settings from *telling* or *retelling*, which involves *recalling* and *reiterating*. They understand academic writing as *transforming*, which involves, according to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987, p. 5), 'the complex juxtaposition of many pieces of information as well as the weighing of various rhetorical options and constraints;' such types of writing as expository, argumentative / persuasive, and creative writing involve *transforming*. The majority of students, both L1 and L2, have little or no experience of writing as *transforming* before they enter university. Learning to write academically in higher education settings for L1 writers is difficult, and is even more challenging for writers of English as a second language (L2).

Academic writing, as Torrance *et al.* (1994, p.379) remark, involves

a complex combination of generating ideas, selecting the ideas that are appropriate to the writing task, translating these into text and polishing the text to produce a presentable document. In doing this the writer has to

attend not only to his or her own thoughts, but also to the content and style conventions of the community for whom the piece is being written.

This complex process of academic writing becomes more convoluted for L2 writers since they conduct the writing in a second language, and they are unfamiliar with academic conventions, and expectations of academic writing in UK HE (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997).

The last four decades have seen the development of L2 writing research from focusing on textual structure of written discourse (e.g. Choi, 1988; Engber, 1995; Ishikawa, 1995; Kepner, 1991), on the process of writing (Hall, 1990; Hyland, 1998; Zamel, 1983), to on the social context of writing (Prior, 1995; Silva & Matsuda, 2002; Swales, 1990). The instruction of L2 writing during the 1960s was with much focus on orthographic and grammatical aspects of written text. The 1980s witnessed the introduction of process-oriented approaches to L2 writing research. Rather than approach the writing from the grammatical and structural aspects, researchers started to view the writing as a creative and expressive process of developing organization and meaning (Matsuda, 2003), communicating genuine thoughts and experiences (Zamel, 1976; McKay, 1981; Taylor, 1981).

A number of issues have been identified in the L2 writing process research. The most salient finding is the importance of process-related writing strategies in L2 composition as opposed to linguistic proficiency. The research shows that L2 writers are less concerned with linguistic problems than composing strategies, and that composing competence, not linguistic competence affects L2 writing (Zamel, 1983, 1984; Edelsky, 1982). Edelsky's (1982) investigation of L2 writing of nine bilingual children reveals that L2 writing is primarily subject to writing process and contextual constraints, rather than language. Jacobs' (1982) study of eleven university students' written work suggests that L2 students' composing competence, not language problems, determines the quality of their writing. She (1982) argued that the difficulties in completing an assignment task as expected and achieving relevance and coherence in writing are more challenging than linguistic factors. L2 writers'

competence in writing strategies seems to have a direct influence on their composition.

As Zamel (1984, p.198) notes, L2 writing is:

An extremely complex undertaking, but it seems this complexity has more to do with the constraints imposed by the writing task itself than with linguistic difficulties. While ESL students must certainly deal with concerns that are linguistic-specific, it seems that it is their writing strategies and behaviours and not primarily language proficiency that determine composing skill.

Nonetheless L2 writers' linguistic proficiency cannot be overlooked in L2 writing process. Linguistic proficiency is an explanatory factor in the efficiency of the total writing process (Cumming, 1989). L2 writers' competency in English language contributes to the quality of written work. Some researchers (e.g. Cumming, 1989; Edelsky, 1982; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose 1996) have stressed that the level of L2 writers' grammatical, syntactic and lexical proficiency affects the quality of written texts.

Research into L2 writing process also compared the L2 writing process with the L1 writing process. Some researchers (e.g. Zamel, 1982, 1983; Jones & Tetroe, 1987) found a resemblance between L1 and L2 composing processes. For instance, upon observing the composing behaviours of her participants and conducting interviews with them, Zamel's (1983, p.180) investigation of six advanced ESL students' composing processes revealed that skilled L2 writers show similar characteristics to skilled L1 writers during composing – skilled L2 writers saw the composing as a creative process of discovering and exploring ideas and constructing a framework to best present these ideas; they spent more time on revising, and they were more concerned with generating ideas and the flow of writing; in contrast, like unskilled L1 writers, unskilled L2 writers tended to view the writing as 'a static transcription of words, sentences, and paragraphs' instead of 'the creation of a whole discourse;' hence the unskilled writer concentrated on the sentence level of writing, editing the writing throughout, checking language usage and expression, and revised less effectively than skilled writers. In that way, L2 writers employ writing strategies similar to those of their L1 counterparts during composing, which contradicts findings of

L2 research on transfer in writing strategies as discussed later. As a fairly new field of inquiry further empirical research is required to test the findings.

Other researchers (e.g. Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1985, 1987; Silva, 1993) highlight the distinctions between L1 and L2 writing processes. Silva's (1993, p.669) review of 72 reports of empirical research on the comparison of ESL and NES (native English speaking) writing and/or the L1 and L2 writing of ESL students indicates 'L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing.' Silva (1993) categorized the differences between L1 and L2 writing into composing processes (including planning, producing written texts, and reviewing) and written text features (fluency, accuracy, quality and structure).

According to Silva (1993) the L2 writing process is more difficult, constrained and less effective; L2 writers spent more time on generating materials (e.g. Hall, 1990) with less planning (e.g. Yau, 1989); L2 writers found it more difficult to generate and organize materials (e.g. Whalen 1988); in terms of producing written text, L2 writers spent more time referring back to an outline or prompt (e.g. Moragne e Silva, 1991) or consulting a dictionary (Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986), and had more concern and difficulty with vocabulary (e.g. Arndt 1987); L2 writers spent more time on writing (e.g. Hall 1990, wrote at a slower rate (Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986), and produced fewer words of written text (Moragne e Silva, 1989); some found that L2 writers did less reviewing, and less rereading of and reflecting on written texts (e.g. Silva, 1990); but others found L2 writing involved more revision (e.g. Gaskill, 1986) before drafting, during drafting and between drafts (Hall, 1987); L2 revision seemed to focus more on grammar (e.g. Hall, 1989, 1990) and less on mechanics, particularly spelling (e.g. Hall, 1990).

While addressing the variation between L1 and L2 writing, some researchers (e.g. Arndt, 1987; Whalen & Menard, 1995) have pinpointed the consistencies of writing strategies of L1 and L2 writing. Arndt (1987) found the composing activities of each individual writer of her study remained consistent across languages. Hall's (1990, p.43) study of four advanced ESL writers' writing

process revealed ‘striking similarities across languages’ in the context of the revising process. The consistencies of writing strategies across languages suggest a correlation between L1 and L2 writing strategies. Some researchers (e.g. Edelsky, 1982; Gaskill, 1986; Hall, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987) investigated the transferable effect of writing strategies across languages: what L2 writers know about writing in their own language (e.g. knowledge of spelling, of general strategies and of contextual constraints of texts) is applied to writing in L2, and ‘forms the basis of new hypotheses rather than interferes with’ L2 writing (Edelsky, 1982, p.227).

Recognizing the differences between L1 and L2 writing processes, Mu (2007)’s investigation of three Chinese students’ L2 writing strategies suggested a positive transfer of writing strategies from L1 to L2. Mu (2007) identified four major L2 writing strategies including rhetorical (i.e. organising strategies, cohesive strategies, and genre awareness), metacognitive (i.e. planning and evaluating and monitoring strategies), cognitive (i.e. generating, revising and imitating strategies), social/affective strategies (i.e. reducing anxiety, drawing on previous experience, and keeping high motivation and confidence). Not all of these four strategies can be transferred positively from L1 to L2. Among them the metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective strategies can be transferred positively but not the rhetorical strategies. In general, Mu’s findings attest to the findings of prior studies of transfer in writing. Chelala’s (1982) study of the composing of two native speakers of Spanish found both the positive and negative transfer of L1 to L2. Jones and Tetroe (1987), studying six Spanish-speaking L2 writers’ composing process, discovered that L2 planning of those who had used L1 proved to be more effective than the planning of those who did not use L1. The study indicated positive transfer of some writing strategies (i.e. planning) across languages. Gaskill (1986)’s study found the similar process of revising in L1 and L2 composing, which suggested the transfer of L1 to L2 in revision across languages.

L2 writing process research also studied the use of writers’ native language in L2 composing. A number of studies (Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1987, 1989; Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1982; Wang & Wen, 2002) have found L2 writers use



their native language to assist their L2 composing. There were mixed findings among the studies on language switches. Cumming's (1987) study revealed that both skilled and unskilled writers used their native language while composing in L2: unskilled writers use L1 to generate ideas, and skilled writers use L1 as a stylistic strategy, generating content and checking style (e.g. diction); skilled L2 writers in Cumming's study also use L1 to assist their thinking. However, Wang and Wen's (2002) study found that L1 was more likely used to control process, generate and organize ideas, and was less used to generate texts. In Cumming's (1989) study participants switched languages frequently, but Johnson's (1985) investigation observed no use or very limited use of L1. Johnson's findings concurred with Wang and Wen's that L1 was used to make plans.

Cumming's (1989) study indicated the use of L1 as a problem-solving strategy. In contrast, Johnson's (1985) participants perceived the use of L1 in L2 writing inadvisable for writers with high level of L2 proficiency. Yet Johnson's participants did use their native language in the process of planning in composing aloud. It is interesting to discover that participants in Johnson's (1985) study used their native languages when writing about culturally-oriented topics (e.g. traditions in their home countries). Research findings of Friedlander's (1990) study show that L2 writers benefit from using topic-related language, which leads to detailed plans, longer texts, and better quality of written products. Language switches enable L2 writers to relate their personal experiences or background to the writing, and hence facilitate their writing. The more first language switches, the better quality of the writing in terms of ideas, organization and details (Lay, 1982).

During 1980s a growing number of investigations placed emphasis on the social context of academic writing. Writing is no longer viewed as a composing process happening in a vacuum, but as a communicative interaction between writers and readers, as Silva and Matsuda (2002) highlight writing is always embedded in a *rhetorical situation* – a complex web of relationships between the writer, the reader, the text and reality. Two important approaches emerged – social constructionism and social interactionism. The social interactionist approach emphasizes the dialogic nature of writing, which is constructed in the

interaction of individual writer and his/her reader while the social constructionist approach perceives writing as a product of a discourse community (Nystrand, 1990). 'The varying and ever-changing nature of the elements of writing' according to Silva and Matsuda (2002, p.253) complicates a writer's task since the writer is not only creating texts by simply presenting their view of reality, but constructing the texts through negotiation of their own view of the elements of writing with the views of a particular discourse community.

In the context of L2 writing, international students write in a different rhetorical situation and discourse community from the one they are accustomed to. They might find it challenging to construct texts which reflect or align with views of the specific discourse community and its readers because there might be a lack of compatibility between conventional self-representation in the particular situation and the writer's self-construction (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Since the 1990s, research on L2 writing has started to investigate the context of writing and the writing experiences of international students in particular academic settings (e.g. Casanave, 1995; Connor & Mayberry, 1995; Johns, 1991; Leki, 1995; Prior, 1995; Riazi, 1998; Spack, 1997). The empirical studies indicate that contexts of writing play an important role in disciplinary writing tasks and writing demands differ considerably across disciplines. International students writing in a L2 context acquire not only academic literacy skills but also knowledge of disciplinary conventions (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Riazi, 1998). Spack (1997)'s longitudinal investigation of the reading and writing strategies of an undergraduate Japanese student at a U.S. university revealed that the student was more frustrated by the lack of discipline-specific discourse knowledge and conventions than proficiency in English. Different disciplines have different expectations and practices. Even within a discipline different classes and even the same tutor responding to different students or tasks may have different expectations (Prior, 1995). Moreover recognizing the value of global contextual factors of disciplinary community, Casanave (1995)'s study of 12 first-year international doctoral students' writing experiences stresses the predominance of the immediate, local, personal and interactive factors that touch students' lives directly in their constructing the contexts for writing.

The next section of this chapter explores the latest research on the differences in teaching, learning and assessment between the UK and China.

### **Teaching, learning and assessment**

There is an extensive literature in cross-cultural psychology and in intercultural and multicultural education that documents differences in teacher and student expectations and behaviours across cultures (Ward, 2001). Teaching, learning and assessment approaches vary across cultures. The importance of *extending* knowledge is stressed in western higher education, by which Kern (2000, p.175) citing Ballard and Clanchy (1991) means that knowledge is socially constructed, not absolute, and the goal of education is to train people to be independent learners and thinkers, capable of challenging existing knowledge. The western cultures of teaching and learning encourage students to *analyze, question* and *critique* ideas, Ballard and Clanchy (1991) argues, as opposed to many East Asian cultures with the *conserving* attitudes towards knowledge that encourage the reproduction and transfer of knowledge from one generation to another. International students from such an educational background might have different preferences of teaching and learning methods. The different teaching and learning methods of the host country can cause obstacles for international students who are not accustomed to their academic practice.

The teacher-student relationship is an important aspect of students' learning experiences. Cultural differences may cause differences in perceptions of teacher-student relationship, roles of teacher and students in the process of learning. Students from a Confucian cultural background tend to respect their teachers and not to challenge them as 'being a teacher for only one day entitles one to lifelong respect from the student that befits his father' (Hu, 2002b). Chinese education intends to foster a 'hierarchical but harmonious' (Hu, 2002b, p.98) teacher and student relationship. Teaching methods are largely expository and the teaching process is teacher-centred and didactic (Biggs, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 2001). The transmission and imparting of knowledge predominates the classroom activity in China; the student is not encouraged to ask questions and express their own viewpoint. Unlike facilitating understanding as reflected in

western culture the role of teacher in Chinese culture is to transmit knowledge by imitation and repetition, as summarized by Hu (2002b, pp.98-9)

‘The teacher selects points of knowledge from authoritative sources, interprets, analyses and elaborates on these points for the students, helps them connect the new points of knowledge with old knowledge, and delivers a carefully sequenced and optimally mediated dose of knowledge for the students to memorise, repeat and understand.’

‘Therefore, the focus of teaching is not on how teachers and students can create, construct, and apply knowledge in an experiential approach, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalised in a most effective and efficient way.’

The emphasis is on the acquisition of the basic concepts and factual construction of knowledge before its application. The student is expected to master the transmitted knowledge and not to challenge the teacher or present their ideas until sufficient knowledge is mastered for making informed judgement (Brick, 1991). In contrast, in the western education system where dialogical and interactive practices prevail, the student is encouraged to question, criticize, refute, argue, and debate (Major, 2005)

Table 3.3 lists the major contrasting features of ideal students in Confucian and British values. The differences between two student archetypes of different cultures imply the potential difficulties Chinese students would encounter in a UK learning environment.

The student from a Confucian cultural background is often portrayed as ‘teacher-dependent, passive, receptive, unquestioning, and rote learning’ (Major, 2005, p.85). Findings of much research (e.g. Biggs, 1998, 1996) on Chinese learners have refuted the stereotypes. For instance, Shi (2006)’s findings in an empirical study of 400 Chinese middle-school students’ learning English in Shanghai contradict perceptions of previous studies on Chinese learners. The findings show Chinese students being active learners who expect active interaction with their teachers. The study was limited to the investigation of Chinese students’ learning a language (English) in a metropolitan city but it implied the shifts in teaching and learning methods in contemporary China. Students’ perception of

the teacher's role is consistent with predominant views in the literature that teachers should be knowledgeable and should be able to meet student needs (e.g. help pass the examination) and solve their problems.

The 'model' Chinese student	The 'model' British student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works hard to achieve results – the harder working, the better the student</li> <li>• Passive-receptive learner, listens to the teacher and studies privately</li> <li>• Learns mainly by reading and processing knowledge</li> <li>• Responds to teacher direction obediently and adopts both structures and substance of study according to teacher direction</li> <li>• Combines intellectual capability and 'good' moral behaviour – a good citizen</li> <li>• Highly competitive with others in cohort, strives to be the best</li> <li>• Does not question accepted norms and ideas in the classroom</li> <li>• Learns within defined disciplinary rules and boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combines hard work and trained/natural ability</li> <li>• Active learner, asks lots of questions and participates vocally in class</li> <li>• Learns by combining a range of learning skills – an active, problem-solving-based learner</li> <li>• Meets the teacher's suggestions with independent mind and imagination, studies in trained but personalised style</li> <li>• Intellectual and moral behaviour not an inevitable combination – the development of individual ethics</li> <li>• May strive to do one's best against the standard</li> <li>• Takes a critical stance on knowledge and learning</li> <li>• Contextualises learning and relates it to other aspects of life in a holistic manner</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Table 3.3 Chinese student archetypes vs. British student archetypes (Turner, 2006)

Assessment methods in the UK HE mainly consist of written assignments, examination, in-class test, presentation, and group projects. In contrast, examinations dominate the Chinese education system. It is conventionally held that Chinese students prefer examinations and questions that require a definite answer. However, research has shown that group projects (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Nield, 2004) and essay writing (Kingston & Forland, 2008) are two most preferred methods of assessment for Asian students. Moreover, Campbell and Li's investigation (2007) of 22 Asian students' (among which 16 were Chinese students) learning experiences in New Zealand found the students valued the importance of group discussions in class but disliked the group project where the group members shared the same final marks irrespective of the amount of contribution made by each member.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the current research on international students' adaptation of a new culture and learning environments with the reference to Chinese students.

Researchers have shown that language difficulties have been predominant issues in Chinese students' adaptation to a new learning environment. Learning styles, academic writing and difference of teaching, learning and assessment between the UK and China education system have been looked at in details. Chinese learners have been traditionally viewed as passive and surface learners, however, findings of some recent researches have disputed this perception (e.g. Biggs, 1998; Kember, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1999).

This chapter has important implication for the study. Based on the literature review of this chapter and previous two chapters, the researcher has designed the study to be empirically grounded, qualitative in methodological orientation, and socio-cultural in its conceptual framing. In order to explore how the research subjects in this study cope with the new culture and learning environments, narrative life story and interview methods have been adopted to help understand their experience in UK HE. Also, this chapter has informed the interview protocols during the data collection phrase.

The next chapter concentrates on the methodology and discusses the research design and some key methodological issues for the study.

## **PART II – RESEARCH DESIGN**

This part contains one chapter (Chapter 4) on methodology, which discusses the methodological approach adopted in this study and which outlines the design and phasing of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This study is designed to be empirically grounded, qualitative in methodological orientation, and socio-cultural in its conceptual framing. The study focuses on how Chinese undergraduate students in humanities subjects at a UK university describe the major academic challenges they encountered and explains, from their perspectives, how they cope with these challenges during their study. Qualitative research methods were used in this study to gain insight into the students' experience, attitudes, behaviours, value system, concerns, motivations and culture.

In this chapter, I address how I position myself in this study; how I constructed the conceptual framework used in the study; and some methodological challenges.

### **Positionality – my learning journey**

My experience of being both an 'insider', with regard to the Chinese student community, and an 'outsider', in relation to the academic community within the UK, places me in a good position to conduct an enquiry of Chinese student experience. However, it is important to consider how my own experience of education might have influenced the research questions and the choices of methods to study these questions. It is necessary to state my positionality by telling my own learning journey from China to UK.

I was born in a small town in the central China in 1978. The province in which my hometown is located is mainly agriculture based. My parents were working in a small factory at the time. My father was a technician and my mother was a factory worker on the production line. My grandparents were living in a small village which was not far away from the town. One year later, my younger brother was born. Due to the start of the one-child policy in China, my parents were penalised for having the second child. Their salaries were frozen for a year. It made family life extremely hard without their income.



I started primary school at the age of eight. There were no kindergartens or nurseries available in the town. Even if they had been available, my family probably would not have been able to afford to send me and my younger brother. In my second year in the primary school, my parents left the factory and started their own small manufacturing business. In 1988, it was still rare to see private businesses in inland cities in China. The factory employed about 10 workers. It was very hard for my parents to make it profitable because there was not much support for private business, such as credit from banks and networks for selling the products across regions. They were too busy with the business to look after two young boys at home. As a result, they decided to send me to stay with a distant relative of the family in a remote village about 15 km away from my home.

At the time, I was not very happy to leave home to study in the countryside. It was mainly because I had to leave my friends and familiar environment and enter into the unknown. The living conditions and harshness of the life in the village were much worse than I had expected. There was no electricity and the nearest town was five kilometres away. Drinking water was taken from a shared well. It took about 30 minutes to walk to the village primary school. When it rained or snowed, it took much longer. The family I stayed with treated me like one of their own sons and I started to get to know some of the neighbours' children. In the following two years, I was fully engaged with life in the village. Like many other children, I had to work in the field after the school particularly in harvest seasons. There was some fun living in a village as well. For instance, there was not big pressure to study very hard as long as you could pass the tests. You would treasure all opportunities for entertainment, like watching a movie. In order to see a movie, I would normally walk miles to another village in the evening. This was often a treat for me and other kids because movies were only played on special occasions like weddings and the birth of baby boys. The movies were shown in an open field and powered by a petrol-powered electricity generator. While you were enjoying the movie, you would also pray for good weather so it would not be interrupted.

My mother visited me from time to time and I rarely went to home due to the distance. It was the happiest time when my mother visited me, however I was very sad to say goodbye to her at the end of each visit. I did not like the village life most of

the time and I found it too hard. However, these two years provided me with an opportunity to witness how harsh the life could be in the rural China. Many years later, whenever I have a difficult time, I always tell myself there could not be anything worse than coping with the life in that village. If you very much dislike or fear such life conditions, you will work harder to make a difference. Now I believe my experience in those two years has motivated me to strive against the odds in my later life. Every time I recollect my memory of living in the village, I feel appreciative for the decision my father had made even though I did not see it that way at the time.

Soon after I reunited with my family, we moved to a small city and my father gave up the private business and joined a state-owned factory as an engineer. The main reason for the move was that my father wanted me and my brother to get a better education in a city. My study in high school was not standing out at all. I attributed this to the fact that I had received a disadvantaged primary school education in the small town and the village. However, I made a real effort to catch up with the rest of the class in the following six years. I was suffering in some of the subjects. For example, I did not enjoy the subjects like English and politics. It seemed all subjects were taught for the purpose of preparing for different levels of the exam. I did not see how they could apply to real life. I did not do very well in the National College Entrance Exam in 1996. I only managed to be accepted on a two-year diploma course in a provincial agricultural university. I was admitted to a course to study Food Sanitation and Quarantine.

I enjoyed every minute of the two years at the agricultural university. The university is located in Zhengzhou, a provincial city famous for its light industry and its location as a transportation hub linking many parts of China. Studying at the university provided me with a new perspective in life. If the experience of the village showed me how harsh life could be, then my initial university experience convinced me how wonderful life and the future could be. Without the burden of exams, I just enjoyed learning more and fully participating in many student societies and clubs. I was rewarded with a small scholarship for each term based on my academic performance; I was an athlete competing in 10,000 metre races and I was even selected to join the Communist Party at the end of the first year. Everything seemed very rosy and, like many other university students, I was expecting to be assigned to a job by the state

after my study. However, in 1998, this policy was abolished by the government in the context of decentralisation of state-owned enterprises and cutting down the number of civil servants. It was very challenging to find a job in Zhengzhou and I returned home after my study. There were no graduate jobs in my home city. Both my parents had left the state-owned factory and set up a new private business to support the family. My younger brother was helping them. I did not want to be involved in the business as I found it unattractive.

In 1998, I left home and went to the capital city, Beijing, to take another two-year diploma course in Business English at China Agricultural University. It was considered to be essential to speak good English in order to find a decent job in the capital. Under pressure to make a living, English learning became the centre of my life in those two years. There were a number of American language tutors who taught us English speaking skills. In order to practise my spoken English, I was one of eager students in the class who often liked to answer tutors' questions. I developed confidence to speak English. As a by-product, I now speak English with a trace of a North American accent. In July 2000, I finished my study with reasonable English proficiency and started to look for a job in Beijing. It was challenging to get a job but it was possible. Eventually, I found a job as an Assistant Marketing Manager in a medium size computer software company in Beijing's Zhongguanchun – the Chinese Silicon Valley. The company specialises in developing and producing software application for the Globe Positioning System (GPS) and electronic maps. It was exciting to work in the information technology (IT) industry as it was predicted that IT would transform people's life and the way of conducting business. The job involved travelling around China to attend IT exhibitions including some international ones. My English skills were put in practice in the workplace when foreign business partners visited the company. Two years later, I reached the career glass ceiling. It seemed that a job promotion needed a higher academic qualification and experience of working in a different company. I did not see the possibilities of advancing my career without the above credentials. I was planning to move to another job in an internet company after a headhunting agent approached me. However, it did not work out following the bursting of the 'internet bubble' in China in 2002. With small savings and family support, I decided to study in the UK and invest in a master's degree.

In 2003, I arrived in Liverpool and started with an intensive English course prior to the planned master degree. On my arrival, I felt a mixture of excitement and anxiety. It was just wonderful to be able to see blue skies (on non-rainy days) and vast green areas around the campus. It was a huge contrast to Beijing's often murky skies which most believe are a result of the pollution of heavy industries around the city and busy traffic inside it. However, it was also a shock to discover that I only understood a few words of English when I talked with British people. There were strange accents, a faster speed of talking, and wider use of unfamiliar phrases. Even after first three months, I was still struggling with English language proficiency. I then realised that it was not possible for me to improve my language skills dramatically and develop a deep understanding of British culture within a further year's taught master's degree. Subsequently, the study plan was changed from a one-year master degree to a three-year undergraduate degree in IT. With a background of working in the IT industry and prior knowledge, I did pretty well in the degree and eventually gained a first class degree. However, during these three years I had to work extremely hard to support my study financially due to the change in the study plan. My part time work ranged from being a cleaner, restaurant waiter, chef, university library assistant, community volunteer, IT technician to university tutor. These work experiences provided me with not only the financial means but also an opportunity to get to know more about British society and people.

Immediately after completing the undergraduate degree, I was awarded a full scholarship to continue my study at the master's level in the same university. On the completion of the master degree in Computer Science, I was offered a job as IT Research and Support Specialist in the university.

The idea of conducting a research degree on Chinese undergraduate students' experience in the UK comes from both my professional interest and the importance of such research. The research fulfils the requirements of a PhD degree, while at the same time it is fulfilling the need of the institution as the whole. It addresses one of the major priorities of the institution: the overriding need for the academic support of overseas students.

In my previous studies, I taught the International Foundation Programme. During the teaching, I discovered that many Chinese students encountered difficulties with their studies here in the UK. They reported that they found academic writing, among other aspects of learning, to be the most challenging task. I was keen to help them with their difficulties, and was inspired to investigate what challenges Chinese students face in the learning and how they respond.

In order to prepare for the proposed research, a funded pilot study on the challenges Chinese students face in academic writing was conducted in 2007. The pilot study was conducted at two universities in Liverpool among 200 Chinese students. The pilot study helped me make sense of Chinese students' overall experience in UK universities.

The next section explains how I constructed the analytical framework for the research.

### **A framework of analysis**

The study is designed to be empirically grounded, qualitative in methodological orientation, and socio-cultural in its conceptual framing. The latter is important given the potential uncertainty of any study of this kind: any study, that is, that is virtually limitless in its capacity for generating questions. In the first year of my study the development of a framework of analysis that (a) gathers what I see to be the salient issues and questions (b) guides and informs the analysis and (c) provides a tentative structure for the thesis as a whole, has been of paramount importance. It has also been difficult and demanding, precisely because of the complexity and interdisciplinary nature of the research topic.

My starting point is the fairly obvious insight that overseas students of Chinese origin who are studying in the UK come to higher education with very different values and approaches to learning and teaching than do their UK counterparts. It is highly likely that the expectations of Chinese students are greatly influenced by their social, cultural and educational contexts of origin and that these expectations influence the learning approaches and strategies they choose to adopt as students within the UK.

Their cognitive and learning styles are shaped, in part, by these contexts of origin. I would like to understand that aspect of transition more fully.

When students of Chinese origin study as undergraduates in the UK, they encounter numerous unpredictabilities over and above the daunting unpredictabilities faced by indigenous students. Not only must they wrap their heads around their chosen discipline or field of study, but they must do this within an educational and cultural context which differs hugely from their own. They are also managing this transition in a second and in some cases a third language. Chinese students within the UK are studying in multiple, complicated, overlapping and sometimes contradictory contexts of learning. There is no ready-made framework which I can adopt for what I have chosen to study. I must construct that framework for myself – what the textbooks refer to as ‘bricolage’.

In the first three months of my doctoral study, I spent at least an hour each week discussing with the primary supervisor, how to develop a conceptual framework – or a kind of theoretical searchlight – to sustain and cast light on my study. This was a new idea for me, since my previous postgraduate work had not entailed this kind of wide-ranging reading and ‘theorising’ that is essential for this way of working. In the supervision meetings, different theoretical perspectives were brought to bear on the research topic and gradually a set of research questions emerged. But I had to keep testing and re-testing these against the literature and my own understanding of the literature. This was fun – highly disciplined fun – but fun nevertheless. This is a very exciting phase in the development of any intellectual enquiry.

Through discussions with the primary supervisor and literature review a number of key concepts emerged: among them, ‘origin’, ‘destination’, and ‘multiple-identity’. In drawing out this conceptual thread, I found it useful to visualise the conceptual relations and to express these relations in terms of models. My past postgraduate experience had provided me with the technical resources necessary to develop my thinking along these lines. Perhaps if my experience had been different, then I would have worked with these inter-relations in different ways. I have learned that it is important to work with the intellectual resources one has and to make the very best of them. So, I am reasonably good at visualising conceptual relations by drawing models

– and I use that capability to push forward my thinking and inform my discussions and presentations.

My first model – my starting point – represents three overlapping contexts which are of relevance to the student experience that I am studying: context/s of origin (Chinese), context/s of destination (UK and, more specifically, England), and the institutional context/s (HE) within which the students participating in this enquiry hope to graduate (See Figure 4.1).

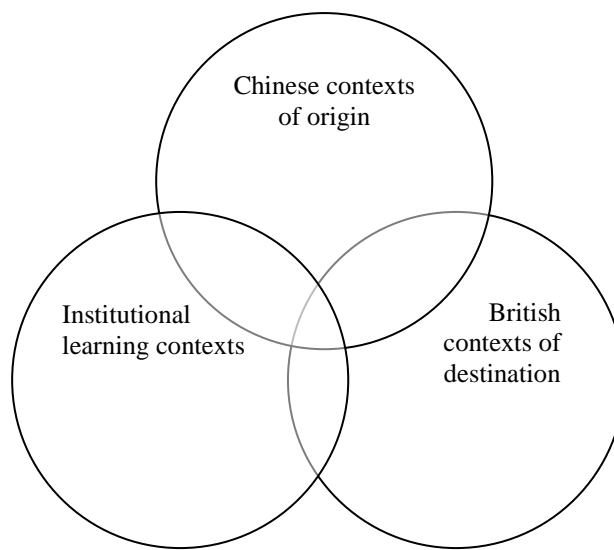


Figure 4.1: Contexts of the study

I found I needed to explore in greater detail the content of the overlapping circles that comprise Figure 4.1. This exploration involved further reading and discussion. The category of ‘Chinese contexts of origin’ opened up diverse specialist literatures relating, for example, to geopolitical and geo-economic contexts, Chinese educational values, Chinese traditions and family structures, the Chinese education system, and English language education in China. In exploring these literatures, I found important sub-topics: for example, the literature relating to geopolitical and geo-economic contexts opens up subsidiary literatures on students’ education experiences, urban versus rural, north versus south, and costal area versus inland area. My reading was a constant process of discovery.

I also needed to explore the history of these contexts of origin. The values upon which Chinese education is based have a long history. Education is regarded by many in China as a means not only of personal development but of upward social mobility. The present one-child policy in China (whereby each couple is allowed to conceive and rear only one child without incurring penalties) has a major impact on family structure and parents' attitudes toward their child's education (e.g. Chang and Halliday, 2007; Hutton, 2007; Leonard, 2008). As a result, today's parents in China invest more resources into their only child's educational development and expect her or him to be successful, upwardly mobile, and highly productive. The expectations are daunting.

The Chinese education system and English language education within that system are also vital elements within this category of 'contexts of origin' discussed in Chapter 1. These are two further frames of reference that have informed my thinking. All this has ideological underpinnings which I have tried to explore by extending my reading and understanding to include Chinese traditions of thought that impact upon the student experience: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and Maoism. This circle of understanding is summarised in Figure 4.2.



Figure 4.2: Chinese contexts of origin

My next circle of understanding relates to the British contexts of destination for the students of Chinese origin whose experiences provide the focus and the empirical base for my study. Some key factors which may affect Chinese students' experiences in the UK are considered in this micro-frame. I undertook an overview of UK higher



education from medieval or ‘ancient’ universities, through civic or ‘redbrick’ and the later post-Robins or ‘plate glass’ universities, to the post-1992 universities or ‘new’ universities) and those institutions more recently recognised as having university status. I have also undertaken a preliminary analysis of some of the market forces operating upon overseas recruitment and the overall effects of the massification, marketisation and internationalisation of higher education. Finally, I have found it necessary to look into the literatures relating to the changes and developments in teaching and learning practices within the UK and how these are experienced by overseas students. This aspect of the overall experience of transition is summarised in Figure 4.3 – the second circle of understanding.

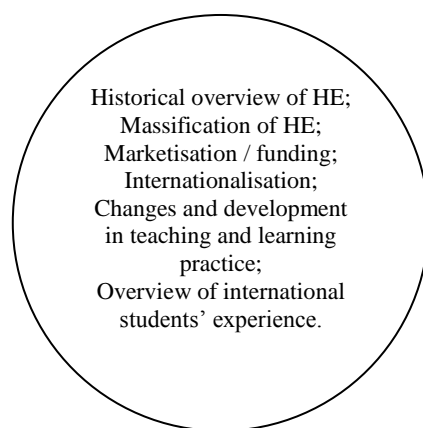


Figure 4.3: British contexts of destination

The third circle of understanding relates to the institutional contexts of UK higher education within which the overseas students participating in my doctoral research are carrying out their undergraduate studies. My research is located within a single institution of higher education, but that institution experiences all the pressures and contradictions of the higher education sector as a whole. I am particularly interested in how the codes and conventions of British higher education challenge students of Chinese origin. The challenge is both linguistic and cultural. In the UK, for example, institutions of higher education encourage students to become active learners, to be critical and analytical, and to think for themselves. These are not necessarily the pedagogical priorities that have informed their schooling in China.

Similarly, modes of academic writing and the formalities of academic assessment may differ significantly across continents. Translating concepts from one language system

to another is not easy, particularly when those systems differ as radically as they do in shifting between the English language and Chinese. The potential for slippage is enormous. I am interested in these differences and difficulties – these slippages – and in the kinds of institutional support necessary to enable students of Chinese origin – of whom I am one – to cope and excel within the UK. I am interested, in other words, in mapping the institutional conditions for learning onto the overseas student experience of learning. Figure 4.4 summarises this third circle of understanding.



Figure 4.4: Institutional contexts

The key research question is now emerged from the above context – what transformations do Chinese undergraduate students undergo within a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning settings?

The mode of conceptual analysis reflects the methodological process. My overseas student interviewees were all from mainland China and had been studying in the UK for at least one academic year. Working with this small group of Chinese students provided me with the opportunity of spending more time with each participant and getting to know her or him as a fellow student. I am bilingual in English and Mandarin and this makes it possible to communicate with participants in their own language while submitting my thesis in English and contributing to English-speaking conferences across continents. It also makes it possible for me to construct a methodological approach that is sensitive to the voices of those whose student experiences I am seeking to understand.

The methodology has built on – grown out of – my conceptualisation of what I am trying to understand. How I address my own questions depends upon what those questions are and how I choose to construe them. Method is not technical, but purposeful. It follows the logic of the problem under discussion. My research method and design rolls out from the substantive source of the enquiry; namely, the experience and perceptions of a particular group of overseas undergraduates studying within the UK.

### **The approach to enquiry**

The approach to the data analysis is mainly qualitative. Data was collected through student participants' autobiographical life stories, and one-to-one in-depth interviews. Most of interviews were conducted in the participants' first language – Mandarin Chinese. Tape recordings of the interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated. Qualitative techniques were utilised to search for patterns and themes and to formulate interpretations. NVivo research software was used as the main tool to aid the analysis of interview data. NVivo helps researcher classify, sort and arrange unstructured information, and provides a convenient tool to analyse the data and discover patterns, identify themes, glean insight and develop meaningful conclusions.

The process of analysing the data was messy and complicated than I expected. Some themes I started off were proved not as significant as I initially thought. Some other themes were turned out more important to participants. Wellington's (2000, p. 135) qualitative data analysis stages have provided some important guidance on data analysis. Wellington suggests following stages of data enquiry – immersion, reflecting, taking apart data, recombining data, relating and locating one's data, reflecting back and presenting/disseminating the data. Immersing myself in the data by listening back the interview recordings and re-reading students' autobiographical accounts proved both hard working and rewarding.

After the data was analysed, the findings of the study were sent to the participants for validation of my analysis. In the email, I asked the participants if these findings reflected their learning experience at Liverpool Hope University. Participants'

feedback and comments were taken into account and adjustments to the findings were made accordingly.

### ***Research ethics***

This research has followed the University's Research Ethics Policy. Before contacting potential interviewees, a Research Ethical Clearance Form (Appendix 3) and Ethical Consideration Declaration (Appendix 4) were submitted to and approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Coordinator and the Chair of the Education Faculty Research Committee for the use of human subjects at the beginning of the project. The forms explained the research's purpose, design, methods, potential risks to participants and actions to ensure the confidentiality of the data collected.

After the Education Faculty Research Ethics Coordinator and the Chair of the Education Faculty Research Committee approved the research, each participant in the research was provided with the Project Information Sheet (Appendix 1) before they signed the formal Participant Consent Form (Appendix 2). Before the data collection, I explained to all participants that they would remain anonymous throughout the study. The anonymity of participants for confidentiality was a priority in this study. Although anonymity and confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, the necessary steps were taken at each stage of the research process to protect participants' anonymity. For instance, all interviews were conducted in a safe space to be designated by the participants; with the exception of the thesis supervisors, I did not discuss with anyone else identifying particulars of the participants; the interview transcripts were password protected and kept with the researcher. Audio recordings will be destroyed upon acceptance of the thesis or, at participants' request, will be returned to student participants.

### ***Authenticity***

The conceptualization and applicability of validity and reliability in qualitative study has been a controversial issue among researchers, and it is beyond the concern of this research to review and discuss the debate. However, given their importance in any

research, reliability and validity needs to be clearly defined, and the action taken to ensure reliability and validity of the research will be identified in this section.

In qualitative research, the concept of reliability is associated with terms such as Credibility, Neutrality or Confirmability, Consistency or Dependability and Applicability or Transferability, all of which are criteria for quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and quality is regarded as the most important test of any qualitative study (Golafshani, 2003). So it can be understood that to achieve reliability in qualitative research is to ensure good quality in the research. From the qualitative researcher's perspective, the notion of validity is perceived as quality, rigour and trustworthiness (Davis & Dodd, 2002; Golafshani, 2003). The qualitative research involves researcher's interpretation and understanding of a phenomenon so no doubt these interpretations will be tinged with the personal beliefs and values of a researcher. It is the responsibility of a researcher to ensure impartiality in their interpretation.

Kirk and Miller (1987, pp 41-42) categorized reliability into quixotic reliability – the circumstances in which a single method of observation continually yields an unvarying measurement; diachronic reliability – the stability of a measurement over time; and synchronic reliability – the similarity of observations within the same time period. Validity is grouped into apparent validity – a measuring instrument is obviously providing valid data given its closeness with the phenomena under observation; instrumental validity – observations match those generated by an alternative procedure; and theoretical validity – substantial evidence has proved that the theoretical paradigm rightly corresponds to observations (Kirk & Miller, 1987, pp 21-22).

The reliability and validity check is essential in both quantitative and qualitative research. The issue of reliability is concerned with consistency and reproducibility of procedures and results of a research over the time, and is relatively problematic in qualitative research since questions asking for perceptions or attitudes may produce different responses on different occasions. Validity looks at how well a research addresses questions. Validity is perceived as 'the design of research to provide credible conclusions; whether the evidence which the research offers can bear the weight of the interpretation that is put on it' (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996, p.1).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research, a methodological triangulation approach (Mathison, 1988) was employed to cross-check the data obtained via the narrative stories and interviews; the narrative stories will be studied against the notes of interviews. For the purposes of validation, the transcript and translation of the interview was sent to individual participants for them to confirm the accuracy.

### ***The research site***

I chose Liverpool Hope University as the research site because I have adequate access to a group of Chinese students. I had been working at this university for a number of years before I started the research degree.

Liverpool Hope University is one of the newest universities in UK, as shown in Table 2.1. It was established on the foundation of three teacher education colleges for women in Liverpool: St. Katharine's College (1844), Notre Dame College (1856) and Christ's College (1965). Liverpool Hope University is unique as it is the only liberal arts ecumenical university in Europe. It positions itself in UK HE as a 'teaching-led, research informed and mission focused liberal arts inspired university' (Hope University 2009). In its mission statement (2008), it states that it strives: to provide opportunities for the well-rounded personal development of Christians and students from other faiths and beliefs, educating the whole person in mind, body and spirit, irrespective of age, social or ethnic origins or physical capacity, including in particular those who might otherwise not have had an opportunity to enter higher education; to be a national provider of a wide range of high quality programmes responsive to the needs of students, including the education, training and professional development of teachers for Church and state schools; to sustain an academic community, as a sign of hope, enriched by Christian values and worship, which supports teaching and learning, scholarship and research, encourages the understanding of Christian and other faiths and beliefs and promotes religious and social harmony; and to contribute to the educational, religious, cultural, social and economic life of Liverpool, Merseyside, the North-West of England and beyond.

Its total student population is relatively small compared with other new universities in the UK, with about 6,500 undergraduate and 750 postgraduate students in 2008. It has international students from around 65 countries, with most students being from India and China. Figure 4.6 illustrates the number of international students from the nine leading countries (Hope Admission, 2008).

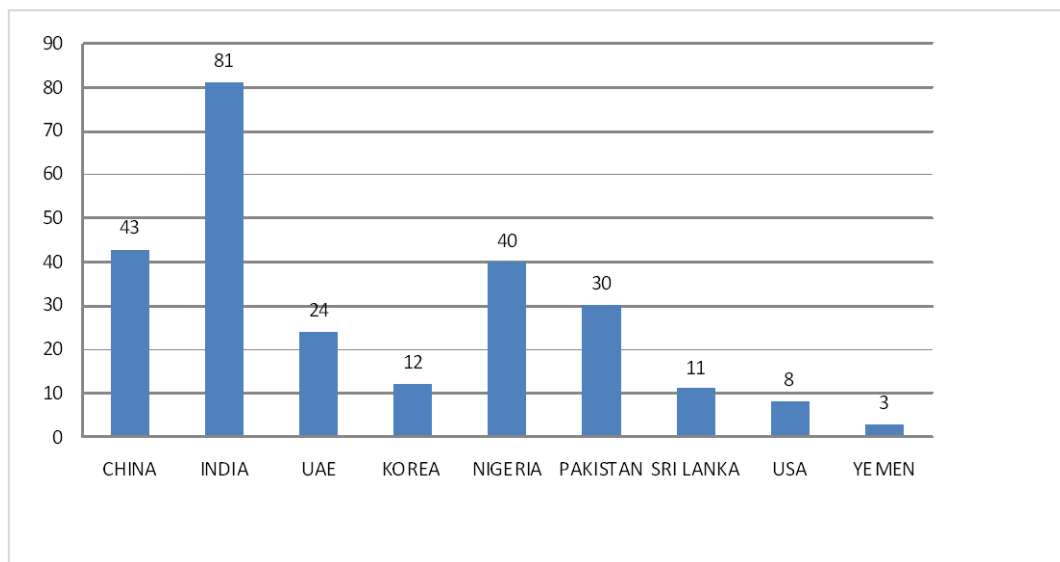


Figure 4.6: Liverpool Hope University international student numbers by domicile in 2008-09

## Research design and phasing

Figure 4.7 below illustrates the research design and data collection phasing for the research.

### *Data collection phase one*

#### *Defining participants*

All research participants were undergraduate students studying on a Humanities or Social Science subject; students who are from mainland China; and students who had studied at Liverpool Hope University for at least one academic year for their degree.

Such definition of participants is considered important for a focused and detailed study of students' academic challenges and coping strategies in this research.

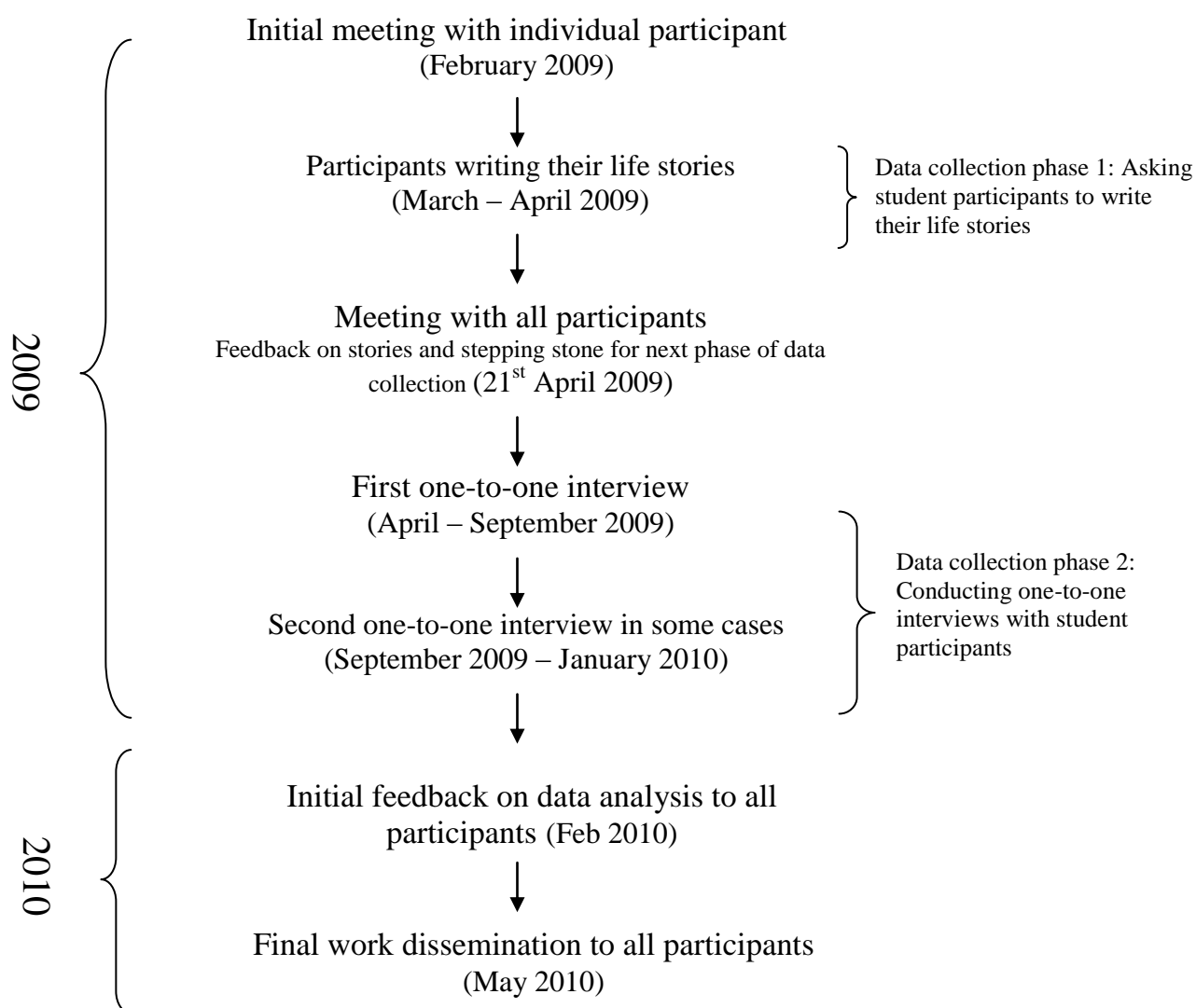


Figure 4.7: Research design and phasing

Undergraduate students are selected because many previous studies have concentrated on international students at postgraduate level, and there are a limited number of Chinese students studying at postgraduate level at Liverpool Hope University. Students in their second and third years of degree study have had an intensive experience of course assignments. In the second and third years of study, academic writing becomes more challenging and therefore more writing problems would be encountered by the students.

Participants were recruited by direct and snowball networks. Direct recruitment involved the identification of a potential participant from the researcher's personal



contacts. The researcher once taught some Chinese students on a foundation course at Liverpool Hope University, and these students subsequently stayed to study for a degree. The other recruitment method was snowball selection which involved participants' identification of other students who fit the research selection criteria. The majority of participants were recruited by the snowball selection method. The profile of each participant is shown in Table 4.1 below.

#### *Narrative inquiry: autobiography*

The study is about the experiences/learning journeys of 18 Chinese undergraduate students and therefore is subjective based on perceptions rather than objective truth. With this in mind, the method of autobiography is used. At the beginning of data collection, each participant was asked to write a life story to provide an overview of their prior socio-cultural and educational experience. Participants were invited to write the story on their demographic background, schooling, learning of English, motivation of studying overseas, initial experience of studying in the UK. The aims of these stories are to introduce students in their own words, and provide the important information on the context of their Chinese origin and help me gain a deeper understanding of how their prior learning experience influence their current learning in the UK. This method has proved to be a very powerful tool. It has enabled the participants to tell what have been the most important influences in their learning journeys, and encouraged them to reflect on their current learning experience in the UK. The research participants appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words.

The length of these stories is between 1000 and 4000 words. These stories are presented in Chapter 5 and Appendices in the participants' original words apart from correcting spelling mistakes and omitting the identities of people and places. In order to protect participants' identity, their names were anonymised by using pseudonyms.

<i>Student Name (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Location / Home Town in China</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>	<i>Discipline / Subject(s)</i>	<i>Length of Study in UK</i>	<i>Plans After the Degree</i>
Holly	Female	22	South, inland & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business and Psychology	3 years	Do not know yet
Max	Male	24	South, inland & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business with Marketing	4 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Celine	Female	22	South, coastal & rural area	Single	BA English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Alex	Male	25	South, coastal & urban area	Single	BA Business and Psychology	3 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Li	Female	22	South, coastal & urban area	Single	BA Business and English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Kent	Male	22	South, coastal & urban area	Single	BA Business and English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Mia	Female	23	South, coastal & rural area	Single	BA English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Andy	Male	23	North, inland & urban area	Single	BA Business and English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Jo	Female	23	South, coastal & rural area	Single	BA English Language	2 years	Seeking a job
Mikki	Female	24	North, inland & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business with Law	3.5 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Vincent	Male	23	South, coastal & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business and English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Ellie	Female	23	South, coastal & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business and English Language	2 years	Taking a master degree in UK
Ridi	Female	21	South, coastal & rural area	Single	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Do not know yet
Louis	Male	21	South, coastal & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Do not know yet
Maxine	Female	21	South, coastal & urban area	Single	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Taking a master degree in UK
Peter	Male	23	South, coastal & urban area	Single	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Taking a master degree in UK
Rita	Female	21	South, coastal & rural area	Single	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Taking a master degree in UK
Chris	Male	21	South, coastal & urban area	In a relationship	BA Business and English Study	1 year	Taking a master degree in USA

Table 4.1: Profiles of student participants

## *Data collection phase two*

### *Value of one's learning experience*

Before the interview, each participant was asked to recall and locate their learning experience on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest score) on a graph. It was an attempt to assess the value of their learning experience as they perceived it. They were also asked to assess their UK learning experience on a separate graph by using the same scale. These graphs help readers visualise students' experience in a 'snapshot' and pin point some key moments of their learning experience. The pioneer of using visualisation in such educational research provides a new way of interpreting student's learning in a snapshot.

### *One-to-one semi-structured interview*

The subsequent one-to-one interviews were employed to confirm my understanding of their autobiographical account and further explore their current learning experience. Eighteen one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes. Both English and Chinese languages - Mandarin were offered to interviewees at the beginning of the interview. The participant can choose either of these languages. Thirteen the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and three in English according to participants' choice. During the interviews, the questions were asked in both English and Chinese in order to clarify the meaning of each question. Prompts for each question were also prepared in order to help interviewees develop their response.

With interviewees' permission, all interviews were digitally recorded. After each interview, the researcher transcribed and translated each recording. It was a time-consuming job. A 60-minute recording took the researcher about 5 hours to complete the process of transcription and translation. However, it proved worthwhile for the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the data. It helped the researcher make sense of the data and some initial themes emerged from this process.

### *Interview questions design*

A total of 20 interview questions (Appendix 6) were designed based on the three research questions. The purpose of these questions was to guide students to tell a life story about their learning journey from China to the UK. By listening to their stories, the researcher started to make sense of how their Chinese origin and British destination contexts were intertwined. Bearing the above aim in mind, the interview started with some general questions such as:

- What have been the major influences on your education so far?
- What motivated you to study abroad?
- What have been the main benefits of studying in the UK?
- To what extent has studying in the UK changed your values and beliefs?

Then followed specific questions on the learning challenges they faced and the coping strategies they adopted.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has revealed my own learning journey and how I constructed the framework of analysis. The combination of the autobiographical accounts, visualisation of their overall learning experience, and interview in their first language has ensured the quality of data collected. The use of these methods is crucial to make sense of their learning experience in this study. The reflection on this methodological design has turned into a book Chinese leaning journeys (Su, 2011). Some of participants in the study have contributed to the book. The next chapter introduces the research participants by presenting their autobiographical narratives.

### **PART III – INTERPRETATIONS**

This part consists of four chapters. Chapter 5 introduces the research participants by their autobiographical narratives and the following three chapters provide an analysis based on three interconnected themes – communities of learning (Chapter 6), learning across language boundaries (Chapter 7), and becoming an independent learner (Chapter 8). Chapter 5 attempts to give a sense of narratives drawing on the accounts of six interviews. Chapter 6 to 8 adopt a thematic approach.

## CHAPTER 5: LEARNING JOURNEYS

### Introduction

As part of the methodological approaches for the research, all participants in the research were asked to write a life story to provide an overview of their prior socio-cultural and educational experience. Participants were invited to write about their demographic background, schooling, learning of English, motivation for studying overseas and initial experience of studying in the UK. The aims of these stories are to introduce students in their own words, and provide important information on the context of their Chinese origin to help readers gain a deeper understanding of these students' learning experience in later chapters.

The length of these stories is between 1000 and 3000 words. In total, there were 18 life stories. Six of them are presented in this chapter in participants' own words without any editing apart from omitting the identities of people and places and smoothing out infelicities of grammar and spelling. These six particular autographical accounts were chosen based on these students' interesting learning experiences and their active engagement in the research. The remaining twelve stories are attached in Appendix 8. In order to protect participants' identity, their name was anonymized by using pseudonyms. In order to help readers visualize where these six students featured in this chapter come from, the location of their hometown in China is illustrated below and each participant's hometown is represented by a number on the map (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1: student participants' hometown locations in China

These particular six student stories were chosen because they develop three themes that emerged from the students' stories and subsequent interviews: communities of learning, learning across language boundaries and becoming an independent learner. A few days before the one-to-one interviews, I asked each participant to recall and locate their learning experience on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest while 10 is the highest score). The first diagram represents their attempts of assessing the value of their learning experience as they perceived it from a very early age until now. Second diagram represents their assessment of learning experience in the UK. The diagrams used in this chapter are used to help readers understand the students' own perceptions of their learning journeys. They are not external measurement of their journeys. Figure 5.2 to 5.13 are not measured against any norms. At the beginning of each narrative, a table is created to provide basic information of each participant.

### **Communities of learning**

The following section relates to Chapter 6. Chapter 6 draws on many student voices but in this section, I am trying to provide a sense of two particular life narratives related to a particular theme of 'communities of learning'. In doing so, these two autobiographical accounts might enhance understanding of those students' learning journey through their own words.

#### ***Louis***

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Degree subject(s)</i>	<i>Length of study in UK to date</i>	<i>Hometown (on Fig 5.1)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
21	Male	BA Business and English Study	One year	No.1	Participant of a '2+2' exchange programme <sup>12</sup>

*I was born in south China. My hometown is a small but very special city. It is located between two provinces, a relatively isolated position with a unique culture here. We speak a dialect which is totally different from other languages. We also have many special customs such as weddings, funerals, festivals. This culture shapes special personalities of the people here.*

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<sup>12</sup> His Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his university in the UK.

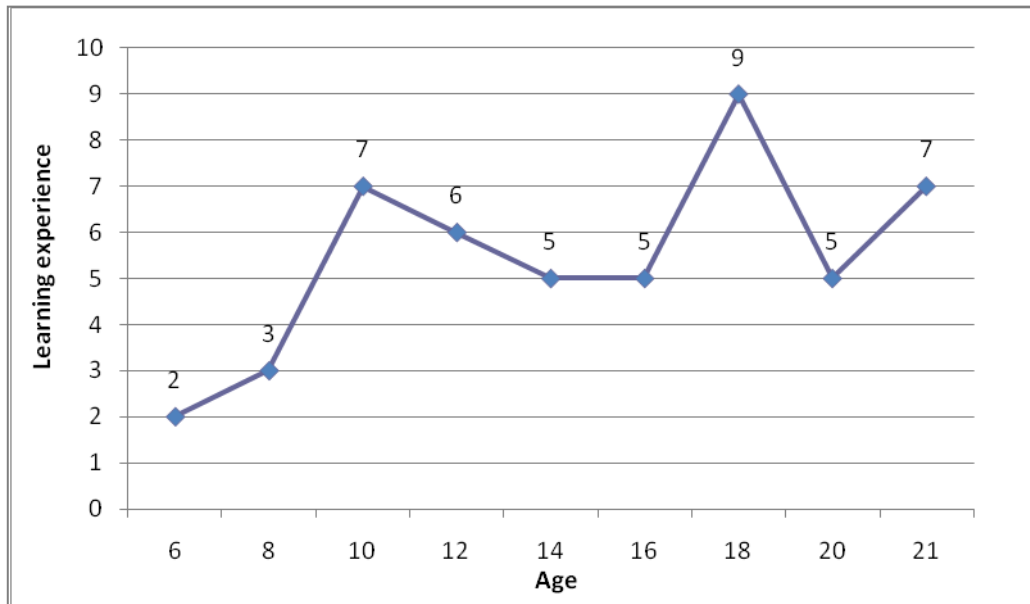


Figure 5.2: Louis's perception of his own learning experience from the ages of 6 to 21

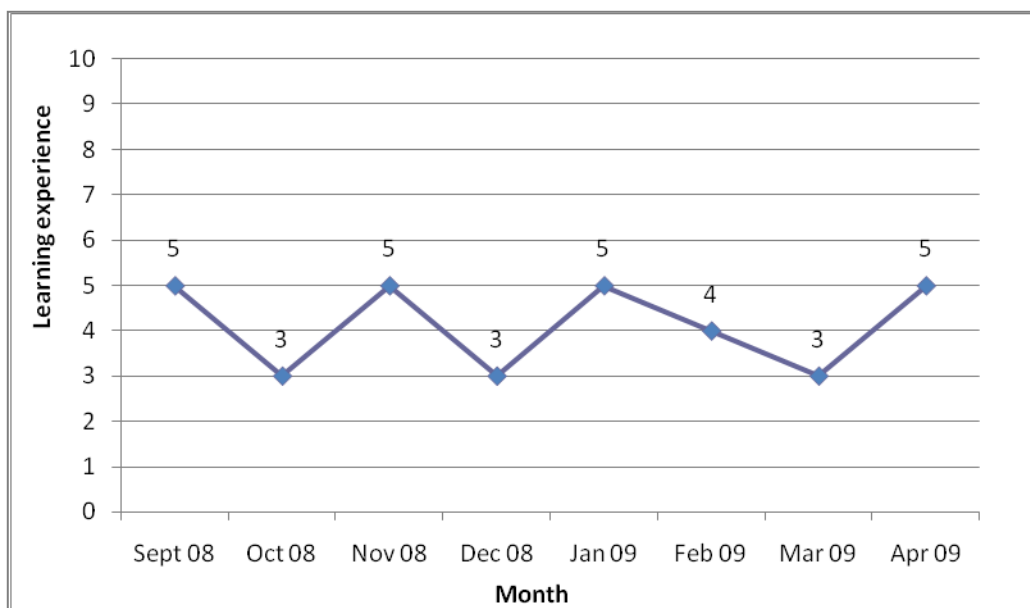


Figure 5.3: Louis's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*People in my hometown are famous for being adventurous, hard working, and sophisticated. These qualities make people here very good businessmen. People are looking forward to going out and exploring the world. A lot of people from my hometown live overseas and become very successful. The richest man in Asia, Mr. Li Jiacheng was born in my hometown. My hometown is also famous for its art. Sculpture, embroidery, ceramic art work, music, opera are very fantastic.*



*I think this culture shapes a very important part of me, like some friends said, you get the qualities of your hometown. This is the background of where I was born and raised.*

*I only have some fragmented memory of my childhood before I was six years old. I only remember a couple of scenes. One is that I rode a baby tricycle carrying a big dolly on my back, another is that when I was 4 years old, my father taught me Arabic numbers and he whipped me with a stick because I was not able to remember them, I think this is the reason why I don't like math at all and consequently, am not good at it. I can say I am nothing but slow when I was a child. When I was 5 years old, the day my father carried me on his shoulder to the kindergarten, I suddenly began to be conscious. It seems that my life began that day.*

*At the beginning in my memory, everything around me is not pleasant at all. At that time, my parents moved out from their village and rented premises as a processing place in the suburb making dresses. People here were very exclusive, I still remember the feeling when I found out that in the class, every classmate had the same family name except me. I will never forget the experience when a group of children in different ages gathered together to bully me. My parents also had a similar experience, but, for the job, they tolerated the discrimination much more than I did. I am so thankful for my parents, who always tried their best to relieve me from the agony in my life. They taught me to be positive, they taught me to tolerate. My mom even taught me to recite poems. This tough childhood did not leave me harmed psychologically. But I think that my cowed and passive part of personality was shaped at that time.*

*My nightmare ended at the age of 7 when my parents went bankrupt and we moved to a city. My parents bought a small storeroom near a shopping mall and worked as tailors. I remember at that time my parents were poor, but I am thankful that they still offered me a stable, healthy and happy childhood.*

*My parents influenced me profoundly: they shaped me who I am. When I went home, my parents were always at home with everything prepared. To me, home represents warmth and comfort. When I had difficulties, my parents were always with me and helped me. Although they were busy, they always gave my sister and me the best care. Every meal, the whole family gathered together, shared what we had been up to. Every summer, my father took us to swim, my mom would take us to the park. They never spoiled me and my sister. When we were only 9 years old, we had to get up in the morning and cook our own breakfast. We had to go to school by ourselves. No candy, no cookie, no coke, we only got a basket of fruits and a bottle of water at home. We had to have good manners, we were forbidden to watch TV, and we had to study under their supervision. I was not a hard working student in primary school; a good punishment always followed a bad mark. I admitted that I was not self-disciplined student, my parents knew me so well, punishment was my motivation at that time.*

*My father was very interesting and knowledgeable, the knowledge he taught me always provided me the material to show off at school. My mom was a perfect wife and mother, gentle, kind-hearted, who always taught me Chinese virtue, made me a moral being. My parents are my model, they are hardworking, devoted to the family, they taught me to be a responsible man.*

*I was the most ordinary student in the whole school, quiet, average grade, healthy, no goals, no ambition. At that time, I didn't know what I would do in the future, the only thing I knew*

*was that, "mom told me to be good and study hard". I had few friends at that time, maybe because I was too ordinary.*

*Things changed when I was in junior middle school. Students were allotted to different classes by an entrance exam. I was luckily and unluckily allotted to the worst class in the whole school. Most of the students didn't study, some of them were in love, some of them were addicted in games and novels, some of them even duplicated the gang movies in class. The teachers never expected a quiet classroom, fights happened everyday. Because I was in such a class, I, who was never outstanding at all, was appointed monitor to help teachers "control" the class. I remember how naive I was at that time. I even tried to stop the bad behaviour in class. I made quite a lot of enemies in the class. Sometimes, a fight can not be avoided. I was good at study compared with my classmates. I was a good student for all the teachers. Those three years was in a mess, but I got a breakthrough – I was forced to become outstanding.*

*In high school, I was admitted to the second best school in our city. Fortunately I didn't do well in that exam, as I would never get that much attention from the teachers if I was in the best one. Because of my brilliant experience in junior school, the teachers appointed me monitor, and I got a lot of chances to get involved in student work. In the second year, I was elected as the student president. In these three years I learnt the most in my whole life. I learned how to communicate with different people, how to work in a team. I made a lot of lifelong friends. I think this is the most important thing I have acquired.*

*At that time my study was not very good. I remember that most of my fellow student leaders were top students in their class, every exam, they were always in the top 30 in the whole grade. And me, a so-called president, was always at a ranking about 100. It was a shame that a leader fell behind his subordinates. This feeling of shame pushed me to work very hard. At that time my parents' tailoring business was weakening, they faced bankruptcy once again. This time, they got through it. My parents read a lot of book about success which taught them how to hold on to their dreams, how to keep an optimistic attitude against difficulty. My parents took a risk, they set up a factory and started from nothing. My parents' books and actions influenced me a lot. They were my heroes, at such an age, they never gave up their dreams and never stop fighting for it.*

*I decided to not to bring disgrace on them. I asked my teachers and friends how to study efficiently, and come up with an efficient method. I scheduled my time properly, worked and studied efficiently. All these led to great progress in my student work, and most importantly, in the national exam, I did well and got admission to one of the top 10 universities in China. A lot of compliments and rewards rushed to me. I made my parents proud, everything was great, I tasted a feeling of success. These three years I acquired a formula to success: Dream + Good Method + Hard Working = Success.*

*When all the applause faded, everything went back to normal, I was in the university. It was my first time to leave my hometown, everything was full of excitement and fancy. I had my first computer with which I could play games I had never played before, I could play basketball whenever I wanted, I had plenty of time to relax. Like a kid in a candy shop, I became lost.*

*The first year I had in one of the best universities in China was a shame for me. I will always regret how foolish I was wasting time in that way. I missed a lot of things; I did not learn*

*much in the first year except I made some friends and saw a lot of things I had never seen. The second year was much better, my life was gradually back to schedule. Especially thanks to my girlfriend, who always woke me up when I was wandering.*

*When I heard about the opportunity to come to Liverpool Hope University, I was extremely passionate. I knew that it would be a challenge to me for my parents might not have enough money; I might face a lot of difficulty when I was abroad. But I was determined, so were my parents. My dream was waken up. I will work hard and earn myself a bright future.*

### **Maxine**

Age	Gender	Degree subject(s)	Length of study in UK to date	Hometown (on Fig 5.1)	Notes
21	Female	BA Business and English Study	One year	No.2	Participant of a '2+2' exchange programme <sup>13</sup>

*I come from a booming modern city called Shenzhen, which is next to Hong Kong. Strongly influenced by Hong Kong and the West especially in terms of culture and economy, it has everything a metropolis has except its scale (it is the size of Hong Kong but when compared to Shanghai, Beijing, it is just tiny). My parents came to Shenzhen when they were offered work opportunities because of their relatively high education (undergraduate and postgraduate degree) and from then on my family settled down.*

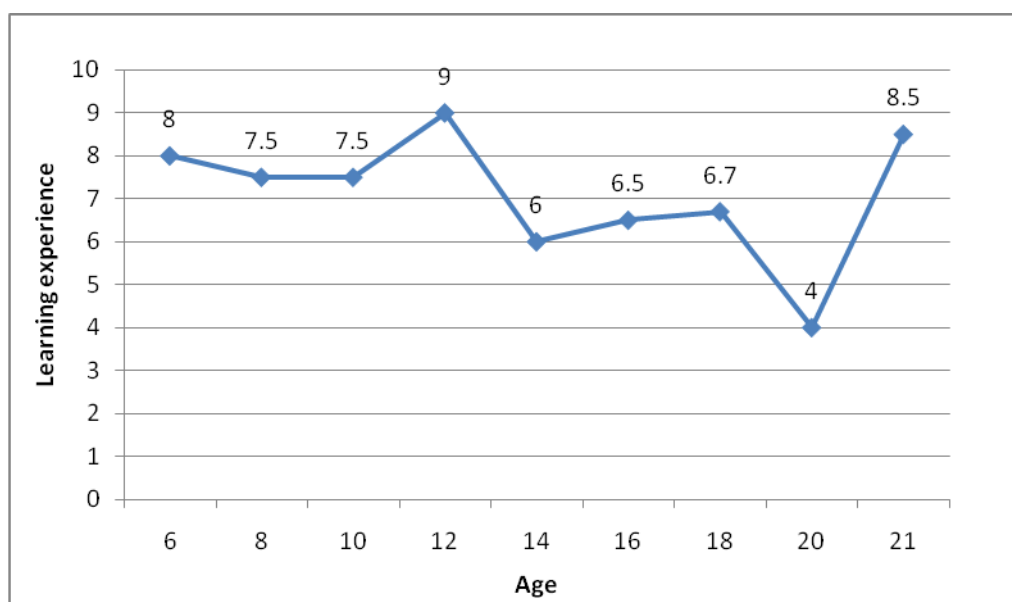


Figure 5.4: Maxine's perception of her own learning experience from the ages of 6 to 21

<sup>13</sup> Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his university in the UK.

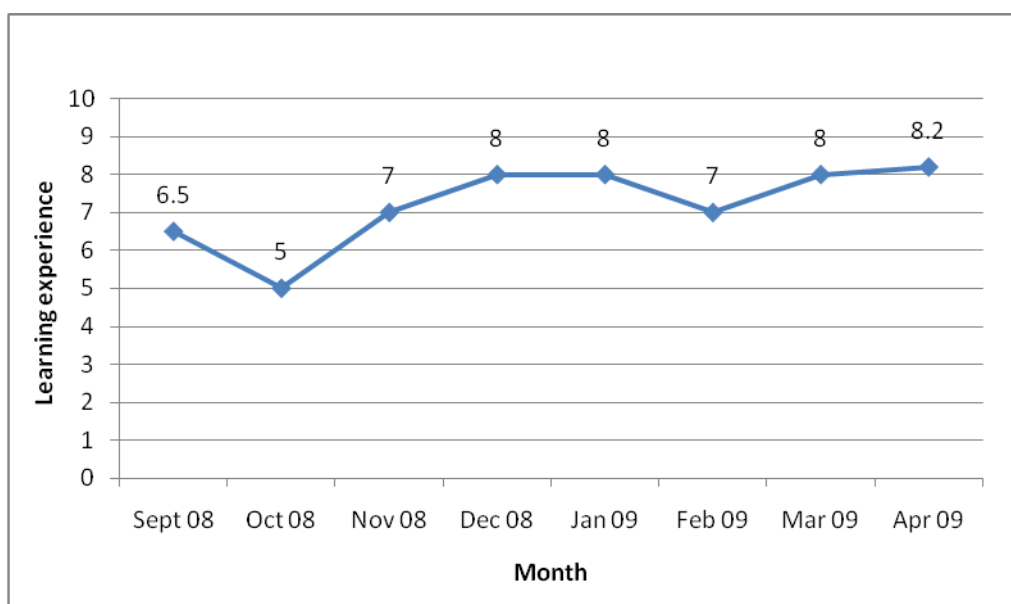


Figure 5.5: Maxine's perception of her learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*As a young, vibrant city, the education system is quite advanced in many ways as it aims to bring itself more in line with international standards. The most significant aspect is reflected through the foreign language teaching. The education department has set up a few foreign language schools to specialize and promote language learning, especially English language. Students from these schools are often regarded as having higher English levels and better communication skills (they have more teaching resources available to students: foreign teachers and authentic materials). Besides, these schools have several programs and contact with top universities in UK, USA and Australia. It has been said that, the most ideal and safest way to study abroad is to go via these schools, which provide students with a good springboard to start with. Meanwhile, other schools also take up textbooks adapted from Hong Kong ones and prioritise English lessons. English is made compulsory even for children in kindergarten. This is the reason why students' ability in English in my city is always much better than other cities (on the evidence from test scores and practical tests).*

*The idea of studying abroad never occurred to me until I started to feel frustrated in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of high school. I was a very diligent person with a certain degree of talents in science and sports. However, there were still many geniuses in front of me. Confronted with the unspeakable pressure and intense focus on the college entrance examination, I didn't cope well with the stress and the gap between my expectation and preparation test outcome. I took up physics as my specialized subject in the entrance exam. Looking back to those days, I think I was completely blocked by my narrow views and blindly sought to achieve higher marks rather than pondering over what is the real meaning behind my every effort devoted to this painful torment. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was drifting aimlessly in the forest and failed to see the wood for the trees. The tremendous shock came finally when the result was announced. I always blamed myself and suffered psychological disorder and lost my faith and confidence. For outsiders, a letter of admission from Sun Yat-Sen University might seem a decent outcome for 12 years' study hardship – but it could be a shame on me because most of my classmates ended up in better universities and majors than I did. Some of them even got enrolled at Yale, Cambridge, LSE, Stanford and elsewhere. The following summer holiday*

*was like a nightmare with fear and disappointment always lingering over my mind and I was very depressed and I started to think of a way to escape the trauma this test-orientated system had inflicted upon me. Maybe I didn't fairly fit into the current test education; it did not necessarily indicate that I was not excellent as the test had predicted. It could well be that, apart from my failure to deal with pressure, the system orientation itself should be doubted. Before I came to study in Liverpool, I made two trips to Britain and Australia and New Zealand during my freshman year and sophomore year, and had my first taste of western life – the experience was really good. The dream to go abroad aroused my curiosity and passion for life again. It's a mission to find a more real me which has not been revealed to myself or anyone. As one of friends often joked with me, he could tell I do not really belong to this crap education in China, and my youth and talents were 'wasted'.*

*When I realized that I had missed out the golden opportunities to study abroad as an undergraduate, I grabbed every chance of finding exchanging programs in my school and even persuaded my parents to consent to my dropping out from Sun Yat-Sen University and transferring or restarting my higher education. They were very reluctant because they were concerned about my safety and they thought I should be content with what I had already in hand because the degree from Sun Yat-Sen University meant a lot in my future career and they preferred overseas study at postgraduate level when I would be mature enough to take care of myself. That was until the Hope university program rekindled my hope – the low ranking of the university and limited choice of courses. However, I would like to give it a go, although I had better options before. What urged me to make the final decision to go was that the learning and teaching method in higher education, at least in my English faculty, remains largely the same as my past experience. Personally, I did have doubts about some of the lecturers' English level and academic level (I'm not meaning to be offensive, but I could not help myself being suspicious about the quality of teaching. A possible reason can be that the new faculty was developing at that time and still lacked qualified teachers). It was not as demanding or challenging as I had expected and it was still rather test-orientated, no matter how the deanery revised or improved the paper – students were fed like ducks (i.e. spoon fed) and crammed for tests. Again I was competing with excellent testing machines which always scored high with ease and left me amazed at their skills and techniques. I would like to compare the learning experience later in detail.*

*The above memory of my Chinese schooling does not sound positive. It may be attributable to the fact that I was quite irrational and emotional when I recalled my not-so-happy old days in which I fought too much and 'gained' too little. Now, when I'm studying in Liverpool Hope University, I could tell that it was not as bad/disappointing as I had considered before. There is no denying that in the western education framework, students are usually encouraged to carry out their own piece of independent research rather than doing multiple choice and memory work. Through conducting their independent work, students need to do intensive research on a certain topic and organize their thoughts and structures with supporting evidence. The abilities such as creativeness and critical analysis can be developed through researching. In addition, students can consult a personal tutor for instructions and advice. The close relationship between tutor and student is of critical significance for the benefits of both parties. The communication and opinion exchanges facilitate the students towards a better understanding of academic issues/aspects and the tutor's personality/sense of duty etc. role model can greatly impact on students' passion and building up of confidence etc. The office hours are definitely the most valuable time in which you can share your doubts and opinions privately with the tutor and give a chance for those shy students to speak out. (This particularly works for me since I am always too shy to ask any question in front of the public*

*though I know it is something I should overcome sooner or later.) Furthermore, I was shocked at the level of strictness of referencing. Plagiarism is treated seriously here because the stealing of intellectual property can be regarded as committing a crime. Back in my study in China, seldom is the case that tutors would ask us to provide such exhaustive references or, it could be that they don't even bother to know where the source of your ideas come from as long as the assignment looks original and well polished. The contrast might well indicate differences in the orientations of education- the Chinese system places more value on the result rather than the process.*

*In a nutshell, with various degrees of help from the tutor, students gradually find / locate their interests in certain areas and continue to explore their potential with learning and feedback. Nevertheless, on the other hand, at an undergraduate level, choosing a research topic has been interpreted by many students as a way to avoid tackling unfamiliar or tricky topics, therefore there is a trend that students usually take on a more approachable topic and leave the difficult ones behind. Some uncertainties and puzzles over other areas (which might be still relevant to the core of course) can remain unexplored or be set aside. During the seminar we were discussing with some British students, and clearly at some points, they did not have a clue about some very basic concepts which were mentioned in the essay topics before. I do not mean to be picky or harsh about that, just wondering whether there could be a more holistic, well-rounded learning process and outcome (maybe the proposal itself is not in any way sensible or realistic).*

*My personal experience with writing essays and doing research is that they make me feel fulfilled. Most importantly, my work and effort has been recognized not only through the decent marks but also the process of organizing and joyfulness of accomplishing the task. It is no less painful or a struggle as the fight in my high school years.*

## **Learning across language boundaries**

This section relates to Chapter 7. Chapter 7 draws on many student voices but in the following section, I am trying to provide a sense of two particular life narratives that relate to a particular theme of 'learning across language boundaries'.

### ***Ridi***

<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Degree subject(s)</i></b>	<b><i>Length of study in UK to date</i></b>	<b><i>Hometown (on Fig 5.1)</i></b>	<b><i>Notes</i></b>
21	Female	BA Business and English Study	One year	No.3	Participant of a '2+2' exchange programme <sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his university in the UK.

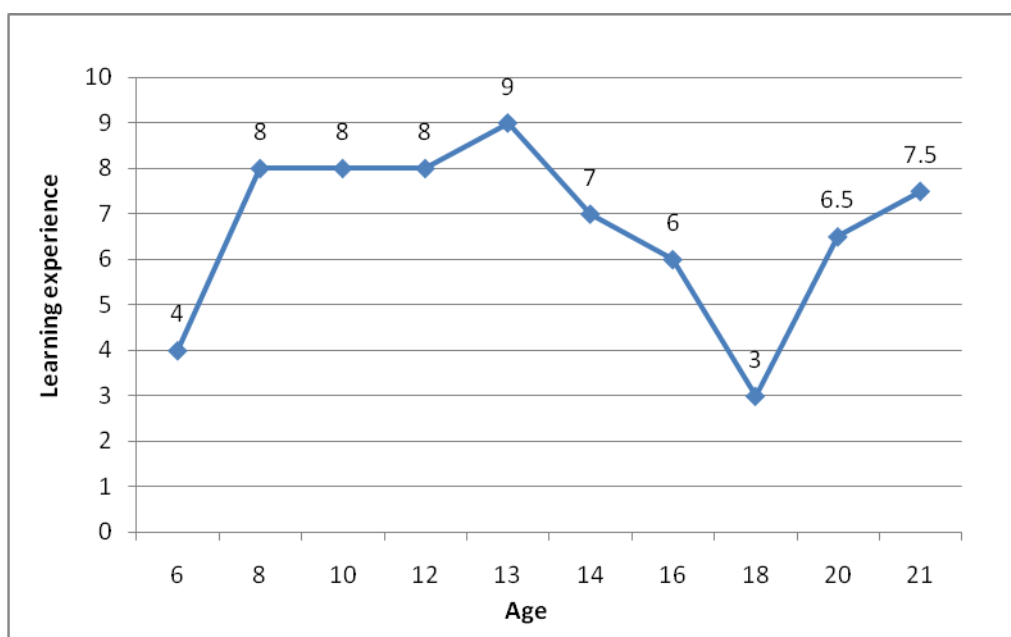


Figure 5.6: Ridi's perception of her own learning experience from the ages of 6 to 22

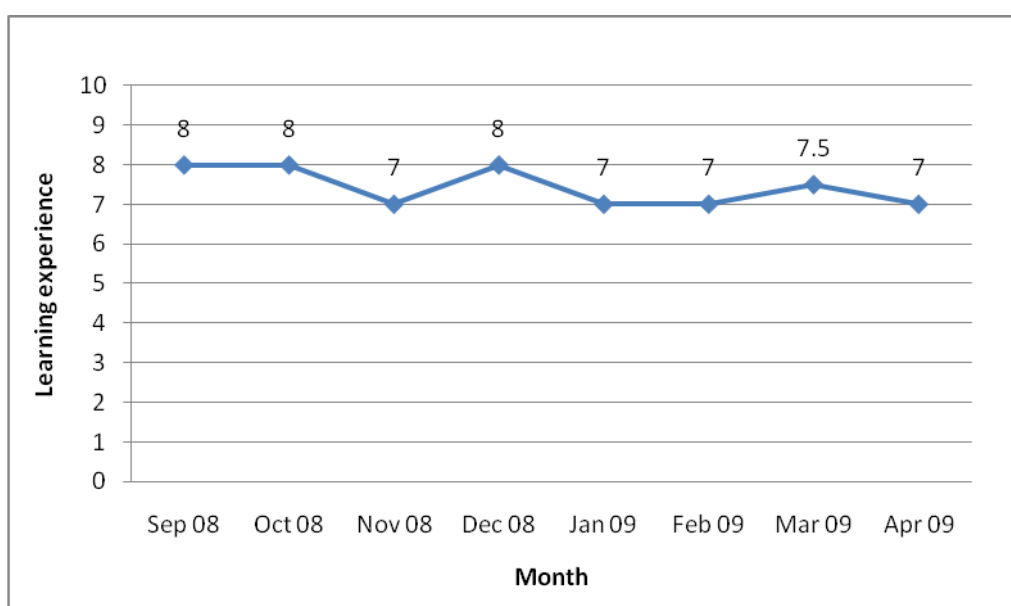


Figure 5.7: Ridi's perception of her learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*My name is Ridi. I was born in a small village near a seaside city in the west of Guangdong. It was said that my parents left to work in Shenzhen — a special-economic-zone city, when I was about one year old. So I lived with my grandparents, who did not have much cultural knowledge. I could only see my parents at Chinese New Year when they would come back from Shenzhen. I remember at that time they had another two children, that is, my younger brother and sister. My parents took their two younger children with them, but left me in my hometown.*

*At the age of five years old, I went to school. I only needed to learn Chinese and mathematics, but my study turned out a mess. Usually I failed the exams. My grandparents did not pay much attention to me, neither did they help me. I made great progress until I was in Grade two. There was an uncle living near me. He was fierce, for sometimes he hit me. I was afraid of him. However, it was he who taught me mathematics. In just a few minutes, I managed to do the simple calculations of plus and minus with his teaching. When I grew up, I tried to analyze why I could succeed to learn from him. The reason I got was that he was serious then I was forced to learn otherwise I would receive a good beating. After his teaching, I found that mathematics was not that hard and even Chinese was easy to handle. In a short time, I caught up with my classmates and even became one of the top students.*

*Now I can still clearly remember that it was in October, 1996, when I was in Grade Four. That was the date when my parents asked me to go to Shenzhen to study. I went to a boarding school where I was in Grade Three. My parents had a concern that I could not keep up with my classmates because I had not learned any English in my hometown. In Shenzhen, students began to learn English when they were in Grade One while the English teaching was not supposed to be taught in the primary school in my hometown. So when I began Grade Three in Shenzhen, I even could not pronounce the basic 26 English letters. You could imagine how hard it was for me. The teacher preferred to speak English in the class and I did not understand a word. I could only guess the meanings from the facial expression and body language of the teacher. I did well in my study of Chinese and mathematics but I was an idiot in English. Luckily, a new teacher came into my life and he was very interesting. He taught us to sing simple English songs. Even though I could not exactly pronounce the words, I could imitate his voice. Because of his attractiveness, he stopped me from giving up my English study. At the end of the term, my English score was the highest of the class. Even now when I trace back to those days, I still feel lucky and grateful. Thanks to the interesting teacher, he led me into the English world and made me find out how fantastic English was. In my study life, that teacher played a significant role. I dare not imagine, without that teacher, without his leading, where I would be now. Maybe I would have already given up English, not to mention study in the UK.*

*I keep studying English and find English is the easiest subject for me. I cannot say I have tons of passion in English. I think maybe I am good at memorizing so English is always within me. However, I am bad at English listening. I think it was because I was always lazy in doing exercises in listening. From junior school to high school, I did not ever speak English after English classes. I had the habit of reading English every other morning, therefore my speaking was not as poor as my listening.*

*I like studying English, yet I am fed up with the multiple choice questions of grammar. When I chose my major at my preferred university, I avoided the department of English. In my subconscious mind, English was only a tool to learn other knowledge. Now every student in China is learning English and I did not see it was promising to take English as my future career. So I picked Business Communication which combined English and business. As a result, I went to the School of Translation and Interpretation in Sun Yat-Sen University. I thought I was going to learn English based on business things, such as business technical terms. However, I was not right. During the two years in the School of Translation and Interpretation, we seldom learned something related to business. In fact, we acted as English majors and had the same course as the Department of English did. Besides, we learned our second foreign language and I chose Japanese. So we learned two languages at the same time. We had to memorize lots of vocabulary and study was not that easy for me.*



*Again I was especially weak in listening. All English teachers spoke English in class and often I could not catch what they said. My listening ranked one of the lowest in my class. Even special English, I could still not get the meaning. I was miserable because I was an English major yet I could not understand English. I tried to improve my listening by listening to English when I was in bed at night before I went to sleep. It turned out to be working, for I could feel my improvement. Compared with other classmates, I was still behind. Even though I was exposed to English speaking surroundings, listening is always a big stone for me. My goal is that I can understand English movies without subtitles. Obviously, I cannot reach that.*

*Why did I come to UK instead of studying in Sun Yat-Sen University? My reasons are very simple. First, I wanted to open my eyes. UK for me is a fresh new world. I prefer touching new things, learning different things and having different experiences. Second, I want to improve my English. As an English major, I cannot completely understand standard-speed English. I think it is shameful. So based on those considerations, I came to UK without a second thought.*

*When I was in UK in the early days, I could not catch 40% of what the teachers were saying. I think there were also two reasons. First, the teachers have their accents. I did not adapt at the beginning. Second, my listening was so poor that their standard-speed English was beyond my ability. So listening is the most challenging issue in my study. Now I am still fighting for it. Every day I listen to the radio. Actually, I do not really try hard to get the meaning. When I switch on the radio, I am busy with other things. But I think now I am familiar with the speed and accent of British English. By the way, British English is harder than American English to 'listen' to. What's more, I listen to English songs when I am in bed at night and I try my best to catch the words. I can say I have made progress in listening but I am not at the level which I want to reach.*

*I wish I could have the days when I was in my dreaming state. Anyway, I will never give up improving my English. And also, I will keep up my study. Only that can study push us forward and further.*

### **Holly**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Degree subject(s)</b>	<b>Length of study in UK to date</b>	<b>Hometown (on Fig 5.1)</b>	<b>Notes</b>
22	Female	BA Business and Psychology	Three years	No.4	

*I come from Chengdu, Sichuan province, which is located in South West China. The hot pot is the famous food in my hometown. It is quite a big city. My parents were so busy with their business and had no time to take care of me, and then they sent me to the countryside to stay with my grandfather and grandmother, when I was six years old. The village was a very poor place, I was studying primary school there, and our subjects were Chinese and mathematics only. In Grade Five, my parents took me to the city, but they were still very busy every day, so they chose a private full-time boarding school for me. I had to stay at the school from Monday to Friday every week. It was a very good primary school, and also it was the first*

*time for me to know about English. It was very late to study the English language compared with other classmates who had learned English from Grade One. I could not understand what the teacher was talking about in English, and also it was the reason to make me hate English very much.*

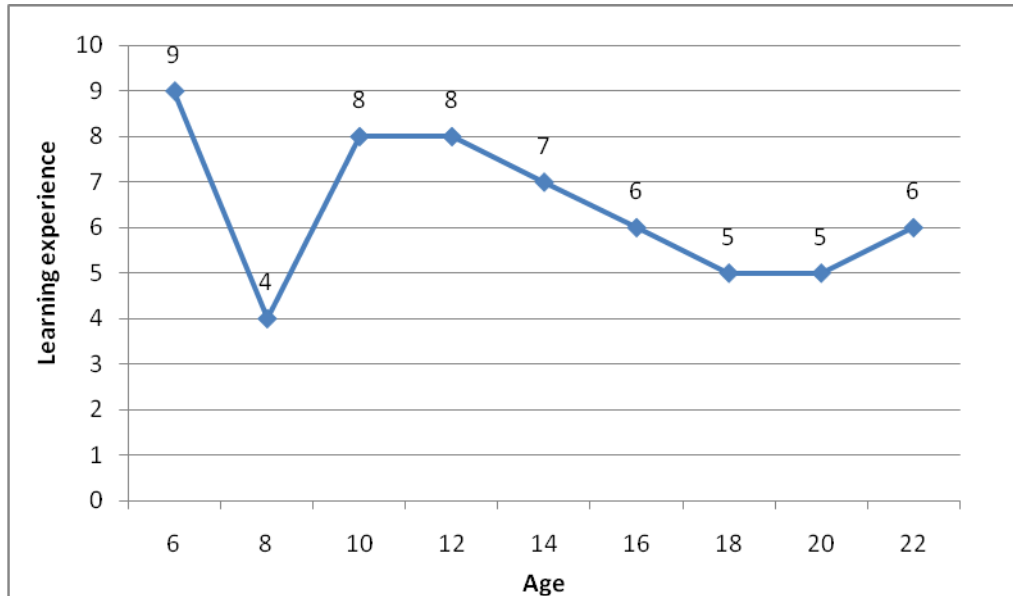


Figure 5.8: Holly's perception of her own learning experience from the ages of 6 to 22

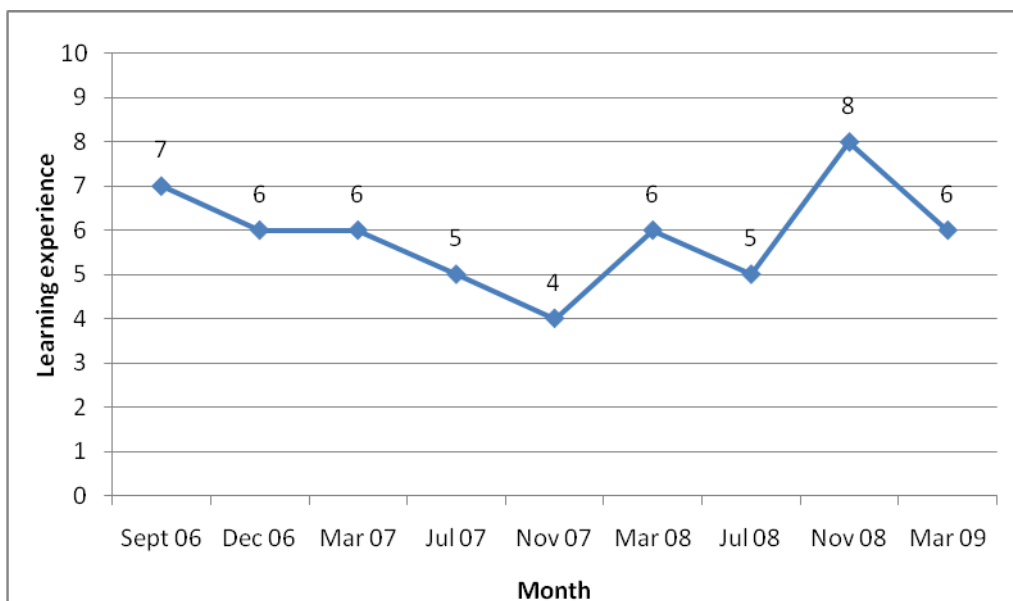


Figure 5.9: Holly's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2006 and March 2009

*I transferred to another private full-time boarding school in 1999. It is a big and beautiful school. I was studying in that school for six years (junior high school and senior high school). There was one English lesson taught by a foreigner teacher each week. The foreigner teacher just spoke English. It was not an effective way to improve my English,*

*because I knew too little English to understand. Finally, my English developed very slowly. I really disliked English very much. I failed most of my English exams in those six years.*

*At the same time, my parents planned to send me to study abroad. They thought it was a good chance for me, to know more about another country and study another culture. In addition, English is the global language. I thought maybe my English can develop faster when I have to speak English every day.*

*I studied one year's foundation in China, which prepared me for a UK University's business degree. After that, I applied for a UK University's foundation course in 2006, which had the main purpose of upgrading my English and acclimatizing myself to the new place.*

*Subsequently, I continued my degree study in the same university. I chose business and psychology, because I thought I am interested in those two subjects; however, I found psychology is very difficult for me.*

*The first issue for me was communication with local students. Some of my friends suggested I should make friends with local students, who could improve my language, but I found that not easy. I always sit or gather with Chinese students, and then the local students maybe do not want to join us. Once in campus, I met a girl. She introduced her church to me and wanted me to join the church. She was very friendly and kindly, then I accepted her invitation. We swapped our phone numbers and email-addresses for keeping in touch. In addition, I just went to the church twice. The people in the church are very kindly, they were talking with me in a friendly way and sharing their stories. I was invited to a pub in the city centre by several young people. It was a very simple pub. People were just drinking, chatting and listening to the music. I felt it was so boring and very late, I wanted to go back home but others were really enjoying themselves. In the end, they sent me back home at two o'clock in the morning. They never invited me to that kind of party again, and also I do not like their life style.*

*Secondly, I had a job in a Chinese restaurant. Most of customers are very gentle. They are living around the restaurant, so they came to the restaurant very frequently. And then, they can remember my name and I also can remember their names. It is very nice to talk with them. They like to correct me when they heard some thing wrong with my English. And my manager is also very kind, he is always very happy to teach me how to speak with more propriety with customers. His wife suggested I should to read some magazines, such as Look, OK. These magazines help me to improve my English. However, those magazines are just for fun.*

*Finally, some of my tutors realized I'm an overseas student, and they know the language is a big problem for me to study here. They would like to give me extra surgery hours. One of my tutors, from the psychology department, always pointed out my grammar mistakes in my assessment's feedback. I appreciate what she did in this way, and also it encouraged me a lot.*

*Until now, I am still considering if I should continue to further studies. Firstly, I think the undergraduate degree is enough for my business in the future. Secondly, it is too expensive to study and live here. Finally, I do not think I can apply academic theories in real business.*

## Becoming an independent learner

This section relates to Chapter 8 which draws on many student voices but in the following section, my goal is to present the sense of two particular life narratives that elaborate on the particular theme of ‘becoming an independent learner’.

### *Peter*

Age	Gender	Degree subject(s)	Length of study in UK to date	Hometown (on Fig 5.1)	Notes
23	Male	BA Business and English Study	One year	No.5	Participant of a ‘2+2’ exchange programme <sup>15</sup>

*My hometown is Shantou, one of the earliest special economic-zone during the reform and opening-up times of China in the 1970s. We call ourselves Chaoshan people when we meet friends from other part of Canton Province.*

*Since the opening of economic development in Shantou, and given the mass population and limited resources in this area, many Chaoshan people choose to become businessman to earn their daily bread. In order to offer enough food to fulfil the needs of the huge family and also possessing pioneering spirit, Chaoshan people trade goods and do business all over the country, even around the world.*

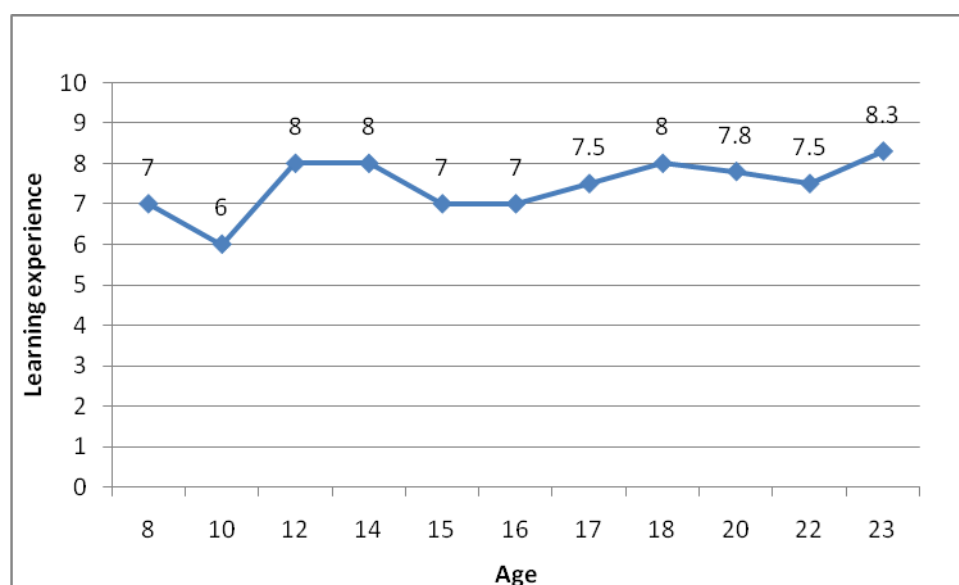


Figure 5.10: Peter’s perception of his own learning experience from the ages of 8 to 22

<sup>15</sup> His Chinese university has a ‘2+2’ exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his university in the UK.

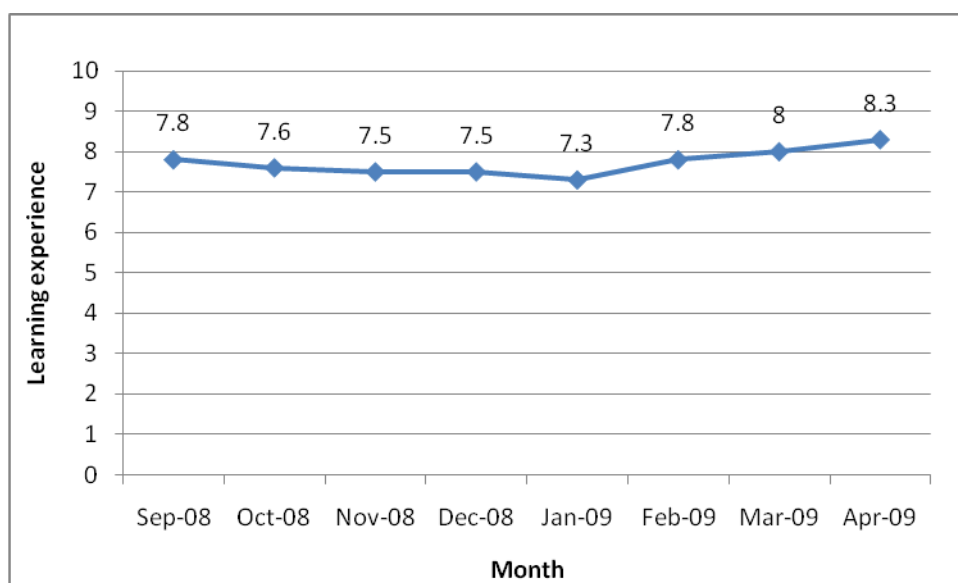


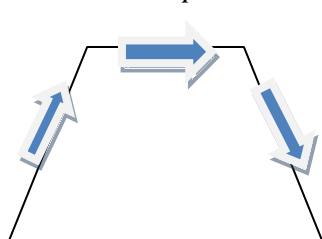
Figure 5.11: Peter's perception of his learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*There are four children in my family including me, plus my parents and my grandmother (my grandfather went to Thailand doing business when he was young but died in an accident), so the total number of my family member is seven. My mother is a housewife. She and my grandmother brought me and my sibs up. When I was a child my father was the only resource of money in the family; he had to become a businessman in order to bear this heavy burden.*

*My family status is a common one among the Chaoshan families. In my opinion, the osmosis of the huge family and the husband doing business sowed a seed within my heart, or within most of the Children's hearts in Chaoshan family, that our future is like our fathers' – doing business. It influenced my opinion towards education before I moved to Guangzhou – one modern city of China, but after settling in Guangzhou, my opinion towards education changed. So I divide my schooling in China into two parts: the period when I was in Shantou and the period when I was in Guangzhou.*

#### *The schooling in Shantou*

*I studied at two different schools in Shantou before my family moved to Guangzhou. During that time, as with quite a few of my peers, I didn't care much about study. We dreamed of being a businessman after University or even high school. The function of Education is like a triangle with a horizontal top rather than a pinnacle as follows:*



*The horizontal top for me was like the level of high school education, I got useful knowledge until high school, and then after the high school education, it meant little of importance to me, or it could even waste my time if I continued to a higher education level. So, I spent little*

*time studying. My school life in Shantou was more about playing than studying. Maybe the life shows a little lack of wisdom, but it was full of happiness.*

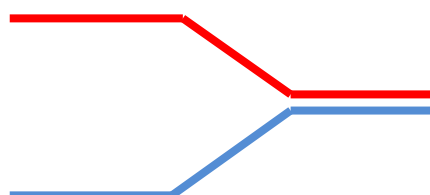
### *The schooling in Guangzhou*

*However, when my family moved to Guangzhou, and I studied at a high school in Guangzhou, my attitude towards education changed. I started to think that the higher level we reached, the better job we could get in a city instead of doing business ourselves. So I began to study as hard as I could in order to enrol in the famous university in the city, which meant I would probably get a good job in the future. The studying procedure was tough, but still it was a happy one. I learned lots of knowledge as well as shared happiness and hardness with my friends and family.*

### *The University Period in China*

*Sometimes even if we pay a lot we still couldn't get the lucky coin we deserved, but luckily I enrolled in the university I dreamed of. University was a completely new and fresh life for me—instead of absorbing knowledge from our teacher we began to get 'things' by ourselves. Besides studying, life is full of self-arrangement and self-design. I chose Business and English as my major, since I believed that within the time of globalization, as an international language English would be have a much more important and practical role. There is a saying, that it is difficult to enrol in a dream university but easy to graduate in China, however it is easy to enrol in a dream university but difficult to graduate in Western Countries. I thought this was right. Two years studying in China was amazing. All the excellent students gather in the same university, I learned a lot from my study and from them. But still I couldn't feel the real enthusiasm. I felt life was not that meaningful and colourful, I felt that I have learnt English for so many years, but I still knew little about the outside world. So when the chance of becoming an exchange student to Hope arose, I grabbed the chance, and decided to experience the real western world in my remaining time at university. On 17<sup>th</sup> September 2008, after a long and tiring trip, my friends and I arrived at Hope, a total challenging and new world to us.*

*My expectation of the level of interesting life for me in UK is shown by the red line and my expectation of the academic study in UK is the blue one as follows:*



*I expected a more dynamic and a more socially active life here, as did my other two male friends Chris and Terry. At the beginning of the life here, I remember that we three boys were so positive towards all the activities, like dining night, gyms, clubs, parties, etc. It was more relaxed here, however, later and later, we noticed the differences between us and the western students. After all we had lived in China for twenty years, a different culture and social institutions. Compared to us, most of the western students like to go to the pub, drinking, and football and are more open, so we have only few things in common which is based on entertainment.*

*The academic life here is higher than my expectation. There is more freedom and it requires self-arrangement. For the students whose first language is not English like me, we need to spend more time on the academic research.*

*After nearly one year of living and studying in Liverpool Hope, now I realise what is the real studying abroad for me. It doesn't mean always playing, but a world of thinking, planning and rearranging. If using a range of 1 to 10 to estimate my life, I would give 6 to my life in China and 8 to my life in UK. The extra 2 is nothing about happiness or fun, as sometimes I feel lonely abroad, but maybe because how to think and get through the period of feeling loneliness, makes me realize more about myself.*

### *Life and plan*

*As my previous plan: after my Bachelor's degree in Hope, I want to move to another city in UK and continue my Master degree in the area of Business. Three years studying in UK will enhance lots of my skills, Another Chinese friend and I even operate a small B2C (business to customer) web site in China. We tried to design a model of online business in the market of University students in China, and then hired some peers to build a website for us, applying the knowledge I have learn to use in the real world. The veil covering the future is unveiled gradually, the picture of life is painted more and more colourful, but still there is a lot of mist and thorns on the road. I like life like this, above the horizon, everything is bright and clear. I believe I will also become stronger, fly through the cloud and enjoy the sunshine.*

### *Celine*

<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Degree subject(s)</b>	<b>Length of study in UK to date</b>	<b>Hometown (on Fig 5.1)</b>	<b>Notes</b>
22	Female	BA English Language Study	Two years	No.6	Participant of a '2+2' exchange programme <sup>16</sup>

*Arthur Marwick once wrote that "because everything has a history, history as a body of knowledge and as a discipline covers everything." This was the first statement that inspired me to pursue history as the core discipline of my education. History has been a significant passion of mine and I excelled at it in High School. It encourages a critical and analytical approach and I am always interested in the connections and dialogue between the past and the future. I really enjoyed the three years' study of history in High School, though I was under high pressure at that time because of the Entrance Exam.*

*The time when making choices of courses for the university before the Entrance Exam was really confusing for me. Before that, all I needed to do was to study hard, and follow the usual route that had been set by parents. However, at that time, I decided I would not follow the route that my parents had set for me, which was to continue my study of history in the university. So I chose to study English instead. Looking back now, I find what a big mistake I made then, giving up something that I am interested in. But at the time, I had no idea of what*

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<sup>16</sup> Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his university in the UK.

*study in university was like, and just wanted to make my own decision that was different from my parents.*

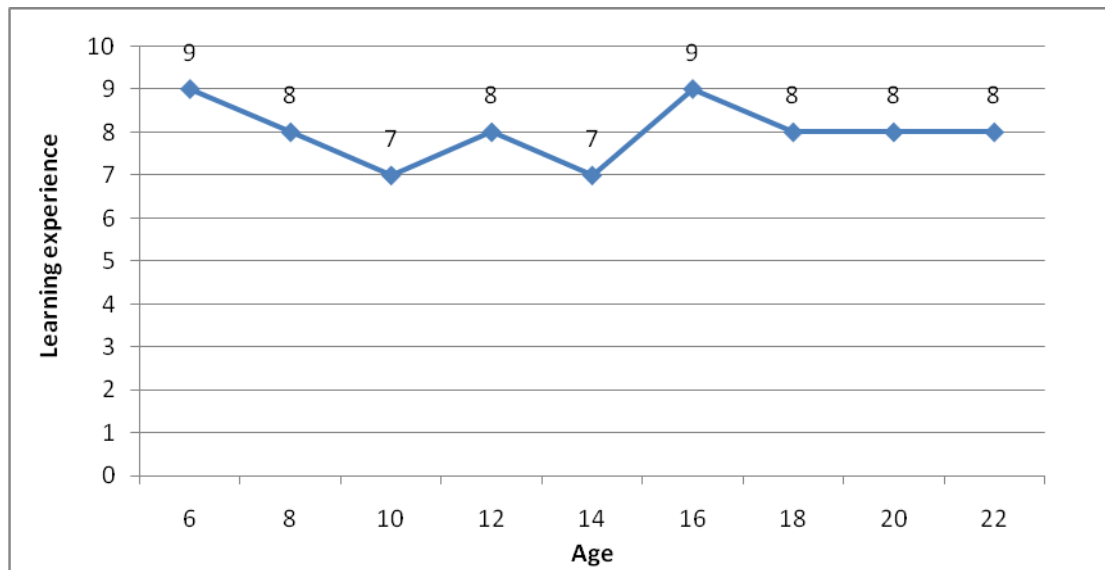


Figure 5.12: Celine's perception of her own learning experience from the ages of 6 to 22

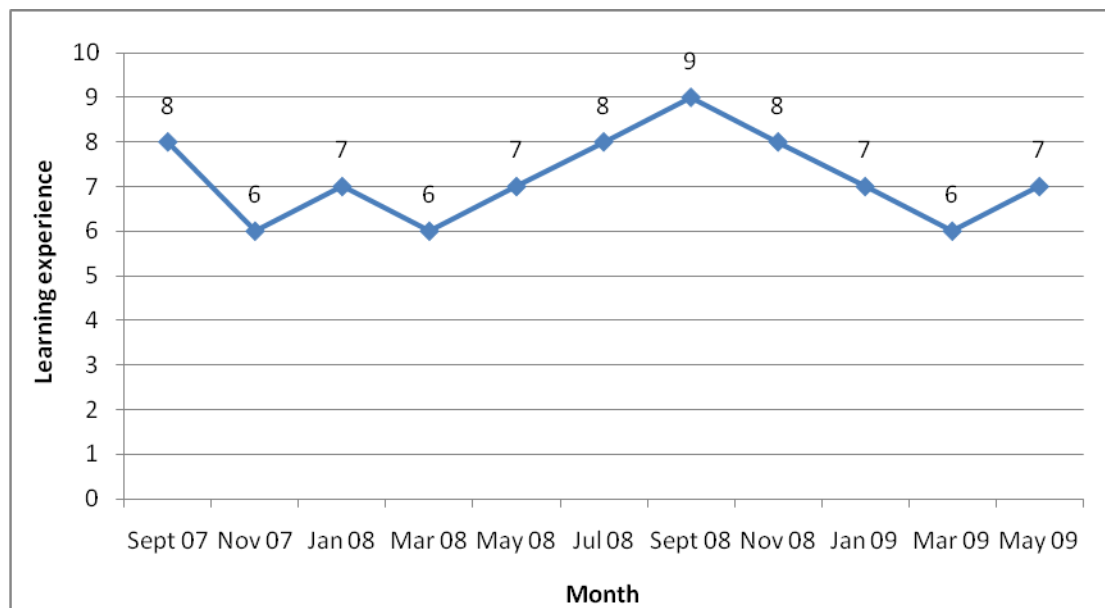


Figure 5.13: Celine's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and May 2009

*Nevertheless, as soon as I entered the university, I realized English is not something I was good at. Compared to the students from big cities, my spoken English was really bad. The English education in a small city like my hometown is mainly for the Entrance Exam. As it was not included in the exam, speaking was seldom taught or encouraged at all in high school. Therefore, after I began my English study in the university, I struggled to catch up with others in oral English. However, during the first two years at the university in China, I did not lose my enthusiasm for history. I chose most of my courses, except the compulsory courses in English, in Chinese history. The study of these courses about Chinese history and culture gave me a greater and specific understanding of Chinese history compared to that in*



*High School. In the second year, I tried to change my major to History; but I failed, because the School of History at that time did not admit any more students, as they already had enough students. Though disappointed by this fact, I thought at least I should work hard on my own major and improve my oral English. Hence, I chose to join the 2+2 programme, for one thing, I thought it would be a very good opportunity to improve my English if I can study in the country that this language originates from; for another, I was really interested to have a look at how people from the outside world see China, and how they viewed the history of China.*

*In September 2007, I finally came to UK with all kinds of dreams about the future and also a feeling of uncertainty. The first few months after I arrived were really exciting. Everything seemed so different from China. I began to live a completely different life, learning to cook by myself, making every decision by myself, and also having to think of everything by myself. With the purpose of improving my spoken English, I tried to make friends with the local students. However, as I began my study, I found the courses pretty difficult for me. For one thing, the content of the courses is very academic and requires specific knowledge of that area, which I'd seldom learnt before. For another, before coming to UK, I had no idea of academic writing. In China, writing is sometimes simply for some tests. But it is completely different in UK. How to do the research? How to get the information you want? How to structure your essay? How to write it academically? Such questions were always confusing me at the beginning. In the first year, I struggled so much to adjust to the study here that I did not have much time to make friends with other local students. Meantime, I also got a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant. Before that, I'd never worked. Work was tough in the restaurant, but I did learn and experienced a lot, like how to deal with the relationship with the boss, how to cooperate with colleagues etc.*

*Very soon, the first year came to an end. And the last year started with lots of work. However, with the experience of last year, I now had a clearer idea of my study. Though it is still tough for me, but by this time, I can handle it easier than the first year. And by now, I am standing at another crossroads again—making a choice of the course of postgraduate study. Deep in my heart, I still would like to study Chinese history again, but at the same time, I want to make more improvements in my English, which means I still want to study for my postgraduate degree in the UK. Does it look weird that a Chinese student studies Chinese history in the UK? I always wonder.*

*The study of English language, though tough, but does help me improve the analytical and communicative skills as well as academic writing. Moreover, immersing in and experiencing a completely different culture from China, I began to compare them. Such a comparison enables me have more understanding of my own culture. Another thing that impresses me during my study in the UK is the way people here view Chinese history. In China, most criticisms and descriptions of Chinese history are written by Chinese scholars; some of the studies are even controlled by the government, while here, most of them are from different scholars all over the world. I am so impressed by these different views, for they are quite different and objective from how I have been educated. Moreover, having experienced perceiving China as refracted through the minds and opinions of outsiders, I feel that the vantage point from which I can critically evaluate the motives for interpreting and disseminating Chinese history is especially privileged. I feel it is essential that I pursue the study of this outside of China. Given the current precariousness of China's self-perception, there is limited space for objectivity in the critical evaluation of its history. I have greatly enjoyed and been consistently fascinated by the literature I have read on the subject of*

*Chinese history while in the UK, most of which has been written and published outside of China and is therefore unavailable for consultation there. Moreover, the study of Chinese history in the UK can also help me to improve my English. Further, it may help to improve my translation skill, as I may need to read both Chinese and English texts all the time.*

*Therefore, I have made the decision to study Chinese history here in the UK. I know that the decision may meet some opposition. But hopefully, I can face it and insist on my own decision to pursue what I am really interested in.*

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented six students' narrative accounts in their own words and reflections. Their autobiographical accounts have provided important contexts for understanding their learning journeys. In the next three chapters, their learning journeys are to be analysed and interpreted through three emerging themes from the data – communities of learning, learning across language boundaries and becoming an independent learner.

## CHAPTER 6: COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING

### Introduction

In this chapter, I am interested in relationships of learning and how communities of learning develop from these relationships. I choose to structure this chapter around the distinction between given relationships with family members, chosen relationships with other students and mediated relationship with tutors and significant other parties, such as workplace colleagues. These three kinds of relationship emerged from the interview data and the interviewees' autobiographical accounts. In this study, the students voiced the great importance of relationships in learning both in China and in the UK, and how the relationships have affected their learning. I am interested to explore the extent to which given relationships influence students' learning. How do Chinese students choose the relationship with other students? To what extent do Chinese students mediate their relationship with their tutors and colleagues in part-time paid jobs in the UK? And what impact do these relationships have on a student's learning?

In order to conceptualise these three relationships of learning, they are illustrated in Figure 6.1 below.

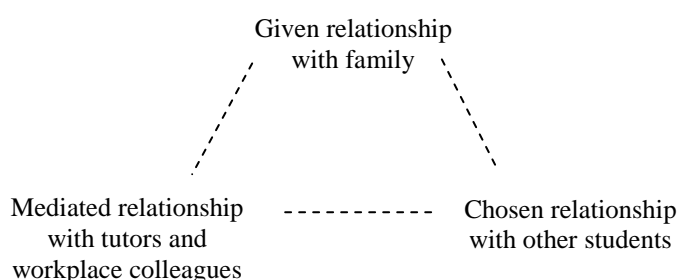


Figure 6.1: Relationships of learning

Wenger (2007) states that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice, and communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in shared domain of human endeavour. His theory of 'communities of practice' has provided a different angle for exploring how and where learning takes place. In this study, learning takes place in the relationships between people.

For instance, students' learning progress is influenced by their relationship with other people. Relationships with others could have both a positive and negative effect on students' learning.

People who are interacting and learning together constitute a learning community. In this thesis I argue that a learning community is constructed on the relationships between learners and others. A student's learning could arise from different learning communities based on relationships with different groups of people at different times and places. A learning community could be mainly based on the learners' relationship with families or peer relationships.

### **Families or given relationships**

In this section, I focus on how the relationships with families or given relationships have influenced students' learning before they came to study in the UK.

As discussed in Chapter 1 – contexts of origin, Chinese families value education highly and expect their child to be successful in the education. This phenomenon has deep roots in traditional Chinese philosophies and traditions. Because of China's one-child policy, some students in this research are the only child in the family. The family tends to pay more attention to and pool resources for their child's education. As a result, parents' influence on the participants' education is evident from this study. However, the parents have influenced these students' learning in different ways. In addition, these students react to the influence differently.

Some parents did not have the opportunity to receive higher education themselves when they were young. It is because of either the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) or lack of opportunities after this disastrous event. Some students became the first generation to enter into higher education in their family.

Parents' motivation to support me to become the first university student in the family has been a positive and strong drive in my learning. I think it's not only about me living up to their dream. I think they more want me to have a better life in the future. (Alex, interview)

... Since I was a child, my father kept emphasising the importance of education. He believes education is the most important factor if I want to succeed in my future career. He didn't have an opportunity to study for higher education when he was young although he was talented. I think he wants to provide me with the opportunity to receive the highest possible education. (Celine, interview)

Parents' influence on students' learning was perceived positively by some participants. Parents were either perceived as role models or being understanding about the pressure of study. As a result, student participants were inspired and strived to do well in their study. Chris and Ellie recalled in the interviews that their parents had been major influences on their education and had inspired them to become a better person.

My parents have been the major influence on my education. When I was a child, I hated my parents because they were very strict with me. However, as I grew up, they have encouraged me a lot in life and study in general. I remember when I was between 16 and 19 years old, my parents almost went bankrupt. However, from struggle, they managed to get through the difficult time and get their business back on track. From them, I learnt a great deal about setting goals and finding a way to achieve them. (Louis, interview)

I think the family is having a big influence on my study. My parents have always encouraged me to try my best in the study and want me to become a better person, but they don't put any pressure on my study. I always aspire to become a professional in the field I choose in the future. Hopefully, I can give back something to my parents who have put in so much in my study. (Ellie, interview)

However, parents' influence on participants' learning was sometimes perceived differently. Students may well feel their parents have over-shaped their decision-making in the education, and they would like to make up their own minds even if later it turned out to be a wrong choice. For instance, Celine was very much interested in Chinese history and her parents were hoping she would choose history as her degree subject in the university. However, she defied her parents and chose another subject instead. She later greatly regretted her decision.

The time when making choices of courses for the university before the Entrance Exam was really confusing for me. Before that, all I needed to do was to study hard, and follow the usual route that had been set by parents. However, at that time, I decided I would not follow the route that my parents had set for me, which was to continue my study of history in the university. So I chose to study English instead. Looking back now, I find what a big mistake I made then, giving up something that I am interested in. (Celine, autobiographical account)

Some students wanted their parents to be proud of them through their learning. In order to achieve this, they tended to study hard.

From my earlier school years, I have always tried to make my parents proud of me. You know, as a kid, there was nothing you could do to make your parents more proud of you than being a top student in class. Sometimes my parents liked to compare me with other kids on school performance. It has made me to work even harder to excel in my study. Their influences on my education were there through all my school years. You can say that they have made me study so hard. Eventually, I did pretty well in the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) and this paved my way into a top university in China. (Mia, interview)

Encouragements and support sometimes came from the participant's grandparents. It is either because the student's parents were too busy with their work or not being educated to be able to help.

When I was little, I had most encouragement from my grandparents. Their encouragements have increased my interest in the study because I don't want to disappoint them. My parents cared very much about my study but they haven't helped me a lot in the study because they aren't highly educated. (Holly, interview)

Parents' influence sometimes came in a different way. Ridi, a female student, expressed in the interview that she did not like her mother's life experience and wanted to lead a different and independent life.

I have been driven to work and study hard for a better future since I started to understand things. I don't want to repeat my mother's experience – raising five children and doing housework at home, which I found very boring. Also I was taught by my primary school English teacher that a woman should be independent financially and have a career of her own. (Ridi, interview)

In cases where the students were the only child in the family, they tended to have a greater sense of responsibility for their parents. They felt strongly that they needed to repay their family by being successful in their study and future career.

I will start my MA study this year and I plan to work in the UK after that. Sometimes I have the feeling that because I am the only child, I bear more responsibility for my family. My Chinese values have a great influence on me in this part. It is not like my parents want me to stand out among my fellows. They have never said anything like that. But deep inside myself I strongly feel that I

would love to repay my family by being a successful person. My parents have been the most important part of my life, and they always will be. (Li, autobiographical account)

The above section shows that parents' influences on these Chinese students' education were evident and mostly positive. The close relationships with the parents and extended families have encouraged and driven these students to excel in their study from early school years. Being the only child in the family also gave them a sense of responsibility to repay their parents. Standing out in their current study and excelling in their future career are the ways of repaying their parents.

### **Peer relationships or chosen relationships**

In following section, I will bring together the relationships student participants chose and developed with Chinese students, and other students (UK students and other international students).

#### ***Relationship with Chinese students***

In this research, most participants reported that they often socialise with other Chinese students in the same UK university. This is mainly because they shared a similar culture, language and situation of studying overseas alone. This relationship with other Chinese students provided them with a sense of belonging and security. Some participants perceived that their relationship with other Chinese students was the most important factor in supporting their study in the UK.

Holly recalled in the interview that she spent most of her time with Chinese students and friends from the foundation year. She lived in a rented house with another three Chinese students. Holly was not alone to outspend most of her time with other Chinese students. Jo and Louise shared this in their experience:

I hang out with a group of Chinese student who're from the same Chinese university. We share a similar situation and we tend to have more shared topics in our first language. (Jo, interview)

I spend most of my spare time with Chinese students. I think it's because we know each other and we share the same culture. I normally go to my Chinese friends to get help in the study or simply to have a meal together. I sometimes enjoy the conversation with other groups of international students, and I found it's easier to befriend them compared with UK students. (Louis, interview)

It seems like these Chinese students had formed a small Chinese community on the campus. Most of them regarded their relationship with other Chinese students as an important approach to coping with the challenges they faced in the UK. For most of them, it was their first experience of studying overseas. In Li's words, friendships with other Chinese students were a crucial factor to support them through these challenging years.

Most of the time, I hang out with Chinese peers who are also in the exchange programme, because they are not only companions fulfilling social needs but, indeed, great friends. (Ellie, autobiographical account)

Some participants viewed their close relationship with other Chinese students as very important for coping with daily living matters but not for study matters. This is interesting that students have made such a distinction in how they benefit from this relationship.

I seek help from my Chinese friends, who might provide me with different views and comfort when I have problems in daily life. I don't talk much about studies with friends. I get help from the Writing Centre and my tutors who can help me construct my essays. (Andy, interview)

I often seek help from Chinese and Korean friends for general matters. For example, if I want to find somebody to talk to when I feel homesick, I will go to my Chinese friends. (Celine, interview)

In this study, seven students were in a romantic relationship with other Chinese students. This relationship has been revealed as a very strong supporting mechanism in their overseas study. Ellie and Vincent were in a relationship and studied at the same university.

I often seek help from my boyfriend, who is my role model in my study and life here. (Ellie, interview)

I think having a girlfriend is positive for me. We discuss what we learn and we share our understanding. (Vincent, interview)



Chris was another participant who had a relationship with a Chinese student. However, his girlfriend was studying in the USA. The benefit of having such a relationship worked in a very subtle way in his learning. This relationship also had determined how he planned further studies after his degree course in the UK. In the interview, he talked about uniting with his girl friend in the USA and undertaking postgraduate study there.

‘an averagely good student with a mature mind’ is the comment of most my teachers. Partly because I talk little but often reveal an uncommon mind when writing a composition, partly because I have been in a relationship with a girl since the sixth grade in primary school. She became my girl friend and we are still in love. (Chris, autobiographical account)

Socialising mainly with other Chinese students provides comfort for many students in this study. They consider that their relationship with other Chinese students forms a community on the campus. This community is like a warm and safe place and they feel relaxed in it. Bauman (2001) suggests that there is a price to pay for the privilege of being in a community. He argues that ‘community promises security but seems to deprive participants of freedom, or the right to be ourselves’. Some participants realised they might need to get out of this ‘Chinese community’ and try not to be influenced too much by it.

Many of Chinese friends in the same hall simply like to socialise with other Chinese students. It looks like we have a small ‘Chinese community’ in our hall. I don’t like it because I think we should integrate into a bigger community and communicate not only with our compatriots but also British students. (Mia, interview)

I hang out more with Chinese students. But this semester I tried to stay away from the Chinese students’ community. A community of course will make you feel comfortable but it also makes me avoid problems directly. For example when I was choosing which university I will go to for my further studies I tended not to talk with other Chinese students since they might think the university I have chosen is not a good one and they would try to influence me and affect my choices. I think the community can help me when I am off track... but I intend to do things on my own and at my own pace when it comes to personal matters such as university application. (Andy, interview)

The bond they developed with other Chinese students was widely recognised to be a very important support for their study and life in general. One of the reasons for studying in the UK for them was to learn British culture. It seems making friends and developing a close relationship with UK students is the best way to do it. However, to

develop a relationship with UK students or other international students and to be able to participate in their community could be very difficult tasks for these Chinese students, as next section reveals.

### ***Relationship with UK students and other international students***

Many participants in this study believed that it was very important to befriend UK students. The obvious and foremost benefit of a close relationship with UK students is the opportunity of practising English; secondly, friendship with UK students was believed to be a good way to learn British culture. Chris viewed this importance in terms of confidence building. However, he expressed he had not been able to make any friends with UK students:

I think the integration into the community is very important for individual confidence building. This confidence will certainly help one solve problems. Not engaging can be shown in terms of who you hang out with, and who you tend to group with when doing group projects. However, I don't feel that I have been engaged in this society and community and integrated in the local community.  
(Chris, interview)

Many student participants reported that they had encountered difficulties in making friends with UK students. In Alex's case, he tried to reflect on the reason for not being able to do this. He did want to make friends with UK students but found it was difficult for him. In his view, UK students sometimes were simply not keen to befriend him.

The majority of my friends are Chinese, and find it difficult to make friends with home students since home students don't take the initiative to make friends with me. As a result, I don't take the initiative to get to know them. I have some other international student friends. It's easier for me to befriend them. (Alex, interview)

Causes of this difficulty vary for different students. This study reveals that major difficulties include the lack of shared topics, cultural differences, different personalities, and time constraints. One participant also mentioned that the difficulty lies in the different way of completing a study task.

Sometimes, I need to work with local students for group projects but I find there are differences in dealing with things. For example, the local students prefer to leave the work to the last minute or a week before the deadline but I prefer

having them completed as soon as possible and have sufficient time to prepare. Normally they start to write the report three days before the deadline, which makes me very nervous. I would normally start to write 15 days earlier. (Ridi, interview)

English language competence is often thought to be the biggest challenge for international students to communicate with UK students. However, in this study, participants stated that the lack of shared common topics were more an issue than the language. Many Chinese students found that they did not share similar interests and topics with UK students. For instance, they reported that sometimes local students liked to watch TV dramas but the Chinese students did not find these programmes very interesting. Another instance that was often referenced was the British drinking culture among home students which Chinese students did not cherish. For them, drinking was simply not encouraged in their prior education and culture. It is not suggesting there is no drinking culture in China. In their home country, it is a different kind of drinking culture related to enjoying a good meal and being hospitable, with grain spirits rather than beer.

I have found that we Chinese students have very different interests from UK students. There is a lack of shared interests and topics between us. As a result, it's not easy to start up a conversation with home students. (Holly, interview)

In my experience, home students are happy to communicate with you but this communication is limited. For example, if there is a shared topic, we will then be able to have a decent conversation. However, if they change to another topic with cultural conditions, I will then be speechless because I don't know much about the topic. Let me give you an example. When they talk about the best bar and best drink in the town, I will know nothing about it. You know as a Chinese student, we don't have a drinking and bar crawling culture. I think difficulties of communicating with home students lie in the cultural difference rather than linguistic issues. (Max, interview)

Culture differences were the main factor in this study that deterred Chinese students from getting to know UK students well. For many Chinese students, study was always given top priority during their time in the UK. In the interview, Mia observed a different attitude towards studying between Chinese students and home students. She believed that many British students would rather enjoy themselves first and think about study later. It was difficult for her to accept this based on her culture and education values. She did not endorse or want to adapt to this particular aspect of British culture. However, she thought it was worth

understanding these differences if she wanted to be friends with UK students and develop a relationship with them.

Another difficulty in forming a relationship with UK students could be simply different personalities. With the above difficulties arising from different cultures and the lack of shared topics, it is even harder for someone who does not like to talk much:

I think the most important issue here is not about English language proficiency but your personal character and personality. Even if your English is not very good but you are willing to communicate with local students, you can still have a good conversation with them. Personally I find it difficult to communicate with local students since I don't like to talk too much with people I am not close to and I don't like to start a conversation. I hang out with Chinese students. (Chris, interview)

Understandably, Chinese students would normally spend more time on study. Learning in their second language with different learning and teaching styles, Chinese students do not have time to hang out with UK students to get to know them. In the interview, Celine mentioned this time constraint.

I don't find it a problem to communicate with home students in the class. However, it seems impossible to be included in their cycle after the class. I think it's because I've got too much to prepare for the study after the class and I don't have time to hang out with them. I think it's a shame that I haven't been able to make some friends with English students. Otherwise, I can learn more about the culture and the language. (Celine, interview)

Mia, in her interview echoed this time constraint. She stated that sometimes there were parties in the student hall but she did not normally join the parties with UK students, mainly because she did not have time to socialise with them. She needed to spend much of her time on the assignments and the preparation for examinations. She was afraid that she would lose control of time if she did join the parties.

Some research participants had made efforts to get to know their flatmates in the university accommodation. Rita talked about her experience in the interview:

My flatmates, they are year one students and they have got plenty time I believe. They go out a lot. They are kind of energetic. Because of our timetable difference, I seldom meet them. When I meet them in the shared flat kitchen, we

just have some short conversations like ‘how are you today?’ ‘Fine, and you?’ The most talked about topic is how each other’s holiday went. At the beginning, I tried to make friends with them. I even cooked a big dinner for them. I tried to sit down and to know them better. But after that, everything went back to normal. We now are kind of like four strangers living in the same flat block. I think it’s because we have our own social group / friend circle. It seems like we don’t have much in common in terms of different ages and different backgrounds. I somehow realise that I don’t have to try to make friends with them. I may just need to chat with home students not just for the sake of making friends. It’s probably just the way of British people socialising. Most of time, I hang out with another two Chinese girls. I feel close and intimate with them. I knew them before I came here. (Rita, interview)

After encountering so many difficulties of making friends with UK students, participants in this study came to some realisations. They started to believe it is the way British students are – they like to go out and have fun; they have some different ways of entertaining themselves; they seem to like keeping a distance from international students. This kind of realisation had stopped some participants from trying to make friends with home students. Instead, they spent more time on their study and socializing with their Chinese friends even more.

At the beginning of the life here, I remember that we three boys were so positive towards all the activities, like dining night, gyms, clubs, parties, etc. It was more relaxed here, however, later and later, we noticed the differences between us and the western students. After all we had lived in China for twenty years, a different culture and social institutions. Compared to us, most of the western students like to go to the pub, drinking, and football and are more open, so we have only few things in common which is based on entertainment. (Peter, autobiographical account)

I think there is gap between me and home students. The gap is not only the age and the culture but also the way of thinking. For example, home students come back from a night out and they make such a noise in the student hall without considering others particularly in the early morning. We Chinese always consider others’ feeling when we behave in a particular way. I tried to go out with them initially but I found out I did not fit in their culture. Now I realise that I don’t have to. (Louis, interview)

However, some participants had made further efforts and found a way to foster a relationship with home students and the local community. It is a process of acculturation they were undergoing. Acculturation is understood by anthropologists as ‘those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups’

(Redfield *et al.* 1936, p.149). Ellie in her autobiographical account noted how she found a way of getting to know UK students:

When socialising with English people or other foreign friends I met here, I felt a strong involvement in the local community. We chatted and also went to pubs together. It is not my culture or, kind of, against my family education to drink and stay out at night. But I found a way to enjoy it. I started to feel drunk even after one pint of beer and I can easily reach the 'merry' stage. My companions made fun of me that I could have a very cheap night out! (Ellie, autobiographical account)

Four modes of acculturation were discussed in Chapter 3 – *integration, assimilation, separation* and *marginalization* (Berry *et al.*, 1987). In this study, most participants experienced periods from the beginning 'integration' to the eventual 'separation'.

In this study, participants reported that they had made some friends among other international students. They had found that it was easier for them to get to know other groups of international students on the campus. Holly believed it was because other international students shared a similar experience. For Vincent, it was easier for him to make friends with some Korean students because he spoke some Korean.

I have very close relations with Chinese students since we share the same culture, background and we have similar problems. I have a few friends from Korea, and Pakistan. I speak a little bit of Korean, which makes it easier to make friends with Korean students. (Vincent, interview)

Chinese students expected to develop close relationships with both UK students and international students. In reality, their experiences with UK students were not what they originally expected, and they felt the failure to form deep relationships with UK students as regrettable. They believed that they may have lost an opportunity to learn from their UK peers. However, they had developed even a closer relationship with Chinese students and other international students. They formed communities of learning based on these relationships. They found the support and strength in these communities for their study and social life. They cherished the relationships with their compatriots. Many Chinese students gradually believed they did not have to form academic and social bonds with UK students to be successful in their studies. The evidence based on their academic performance can be

found in Appendix 9. This finding coincides with a recent study by Montgomery and McDowell (2008).

### **Mediated relationships**

Chinese students' learning experiences in the UK also closely involve the relationships they developed with mentors (tutors) and colleagues if the students worked part-time as a complement to their study. I call these 'mediated' relationships because although these relationships were sometimes given to them, the students also had a certain leeway in developing these relationships.

In following section, I will focus on how Chinese students mediate the relationship with their mentors (tutors) in the learning context and work colleagues in the context of part-time employment.

#### ***Relationship with mentors (tutors)***

Confucian teachings emphasize the social relationships and the role relationships in a social interaction (Hwang 2001) and encourage one to respect superiors, and superiors to show benevolence to their juniors in order to maintain a harmonious social order. Influenced by these Confucian traditions, Chinese students tend to respect deeply their tutors, and expect their tutors to show kindness to them. Regarded tutors as the source of knowledge, the participants reported that tutors in Chinese classrooms are seldom challenged by the students, who show great reverence towards their teachers. Unlike in the classroom where formal relations predominate, the participants recalled, outside of the classroom, they often had an informal relationships with their tutors. Tutors in China are often perceived as caring and sympathetic, as one Chinese saying goes, 'if you accept the responsibility of teaching someone for even a day, you have a lifelong commitment to nurture and teach him, as a father would his son' (一日为师, 终身为父). Besides being educators, teachers are seen in China as personal mentors, responsible for the student's overall development; there is a strong emphasis in the Chinese context on an affective and personal relationship between teacher and students (Ho 2001). It is these close and personal relationships that the participants had expected to establish with their tutors in the UK.

On the contrary, what they experienced in the UK was not what they had expected. According to the participants, at the beginning they found it quite difficult to adjust to the teacher-student relationship in the UK. They were surprised to find out that surgery or office hours were set up and students were only allowed to see the tutors during the set hours, and that an appointment was required to see a tutor. In China, the participants remembered they could ask for help from a teacher at anytime as they wished and needed. Some participants were discouraged from seeking help from their tutor since the difficulties of arranging a suitable time and the limited time allocated to them. They experienced less close teacher-student relationships in the UK than they did in China. They found it difficult and had no opportunities to form a close relationship with their tutors in the UK, as some participants recalled:

In China we have a principal tutor in one class who you can seek help from when having problems. In China our principal tutor teaches us the core module, which has about 8 hours of teaching per week. We get to meet the tutor very often. But here one module only has two hours teaching, and two hours seminar but sometimes the seminar is cancelled. (Andy, interview)

The participants reported the relationship they had with their tutors was kept very professional: tutors provided help only with academic issues; they had no contact with their tutors outside of the classroom and surgery hours, and virtually no opportunities to form a friendship with their tutors.

Nonetheless, some participants perceived the help and support they received from tutors positively, and acknowledged that some tutors were very approachable and even provided them with additional support with their study, as some recalled:

I learned a lot from my tutors. They helped with our assignments and proofread them. They always gave us great advice and took more responsibility than they should have. (Li, interview)

Chinese students tended to go back to those tutor who showed understanding of international students' experience of challenging academic adaptations. Students very much appreciated the UK tutors who provided them with additional help and support.



It was the kind of student-tutor relationship that they preferred. Holly wrote of her relationship with one of her tutors:

[S]ome of my tutors realized I'm an overseas student, and they know the language is a big problem for me to study here. They would like to give me extra surgery hours. One of my tutors, from the psychology department, always pointed out my grammar mistakes in my assessment's feedback. I appreciate what she did in this way, and also it encouraged me a lot. (Holly, autobiographical account)

The relationships with tutors were treasured by many of the Chinese students because of their prior education experience and Confucian teachings on the role of tutors. This study reveals that Chinese students were apt to keep a distance from those tutors who only met students in timetabled office hours and showed no sympathy towards international students; they tended to develop closer relationships with those tutors who showed an understanding of the challenges international students face and were willing to provide them with additional help.

### ***Working Relationships within the contexts of part-time employment***

Many participants in the research had part-time jobs during their study in the UK. Chinese students take part-time jobs for various reasons. Some believed they needed a paid part-time job to support their study financially while others took paid or voluntary jobs as an opportunity to practise English and comprehend the British culture.

Being involved in voluntary work provides me with an opportunity to communicate with local people, helps me practise my English speaking skills, and makes me feel a sense of involvement in the local community. (Ellie, interview)

In this study, participants' workplaces vary. It mainly depended on the students' English proficiency and confidence in communicating with others. Many chose to work in Chinese restaurants on their arrival since there was a minimal requirement for English language proficiency and Chinese language could be used as the main communication medium. After a few months, some participants tended to find employment somewhere else. For instance, Maxine and Ellie were working in a charity shop; Mikki and Max were working in McDonalds; Louis and Holly were working in a take away shop.

The relationships they developed with colleagues in the work places have been regarded as very important for their leaning experience in the UK as a whole. Good personal relationships with working colleagues often provide Chinese students an opportunity to appreciate the warm side of British characters and learn British culture. In the interview, one student participant talked about an unforgettable Christmas Eve he spent at a colleague's home in Liverpool. He was invited to spend Christmas with an English colleague who was interested in Chinese culture. It was the first ever authentic Christmas he had experienced. He learnt a lot about the Christmas traditions and developed a much closer friendship with the colleague. He commented that this was the kind of experience he had expected to gain and it had made his time in the UK more colourful.

For those who were planning to work in the UK after their study, it was important for them to learn how to handle working relationships with colleagues of different cultures. In the interview, Ellie related the experience of how she adjusted her perceptions of working relationships with her English manager. She mentioned how she felt honoured when the English manager made her a cup of tea during a break. In China, it is not common that the managers serve a drink for his/her subordinates. She learnt it is quite common and appropriate in UK work places to accept such an offer from senior colleagues.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has revealed the great importance Chinese students place on their relationship with their families, and how this relationship has influenced their learning. When they arrived in the UK, they were eager to foster a close relationship with UK students and to try to learn from them. However, this study shows that they experienced great difficulties in achieving this due to culture differences, diverse personal interests, time constraints, and different personalities. As a result, most of them tended to stay within the Chinese community. Students perceived teacher-student relationships in the UK as important and helpful but not as close as in China.

Chinese students are studying in complex and overlapping ‘communities of learning’. This chapter has demonstrated that the communities of learning were based on students’ relationships with others. Next chapter, I explore how the participants articulated their experience of learning across language boundaries.

## **CHAPTER 7: LEARNING ACROSS LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES**

### **Introduction**

This chapter investigates the participants' learning experiences across language boundaries. The findings are categorized into three sections - prior learning experiences, current learning situation and aspirations for the future. In the prior learning experiences section, the participants' early linguistic influences and English language education are explored. The current learning situation mainly focuses on the linguistic challenges they face, differences in learning and teaching styles, and their experience of academic writing. The issues I intend to address in this chapter are a) how their previous learning experiences have shaped their current learning behaviours; b) to what extent their prior English language education has influenced their current learning in either positive or negative ways; c) what impacts their previous learning and teaching styles have on the participants' learning in UK; d) how the experience of learning across language boundaries will shape their aspirations for the future.

### **Prior learning experience**

In this section I am interested in exploring how participants' early linguistic experiences in China and English language education have influenced their current learning in the UK. The experiences of learning to speak different dialects and learning different languages with the changing environment have, to some extent, raised the participant's awareness of difficulties they would encounter in a new learning environment. This study shows that the English language learning that the participants obtained in their previous education have direct impact on their learning in UK in terms of their English language competence.

### ***Early linguistic influences***

Some student participants experienced language differences at certain stages of their life. Many regional dialects prevail in China. The dialects are distinct in spoken forms of the language and they vary across north and south, urban and rural areas, coastal area and inland. For instance, one participant recalled that in the beginning he had difficulties in communicating with local students when he moved from his northern hometown to Guangzhou to study. He felt isolated and afraid of speaking to others. With time, his

confidence gradually increased with the increasing familiarity of the new dialect and learning environment. He remarked that he expected and prepared for the language difficulties he would face initially in the UK since he had experienced learning in a different language environment before.

Some participants had experiences of learning different languages. For instance, one participant was taking Japanese courses outside of school as her third language. Her study in Japan had enabled her to speak and write Japanese confidently. Some participants have been studying French as their third language. Not only has this helped make them aware of language learning difficulties, the experience of learning different language has also helped increase their ability to learn. Some participants realized that the best way to master a new language was to have constant contact daily with the language, in another words, to use the language on a regular basis. In addition, one participant stated that language learning was also culture learning. That was why she had chosen to study culture-related courses alongside the language-learning course. The understanding of the culture would facilitate the acquisition of a new language.

### ***English language education***

As has been discussed in Chapter 1 – the Contexts of Origin--China has a long history of contact with the English language and great emphasis has been placed on English language learning in schools across China, especially since the introduction of the Open Door Policy and launch of China's modernization in 1978. The participants in this research have had contact with English from a very early stage of their life. They started learning English in primary schools, and continued during secondary schooling. They have been inculcated with the importance of mastering English language because of the career prospects it opens up. As some participants recalled:

Deep in my mind when I was a little boy, I understood English is very important for my future. Such concept just went into my mind unconsciously in respond to the rapidly change in environment. (Vincent, autobiographical account)

In my school years, Miss Xu made me realize that English is not simply a skill but a very useful one. It is a key to the door of the outside world... (Rita, autobiographical account)

This awareness of the importance has been fostered by the fact that English is a core subject in primary and secondary education and a compulsory subject in school leaving examinations and the NCEE. One would naturally assume that with the advantage of an early start in learning English and continuous English language learning for over six or seven years, students should have been very confident of using English in an environment where English is the medium of instruction. However, the participants voiced the concern that English has been an underlying barrier to their learning in UK, although not a major one.

Two main reasons might have contributed to the difficulties. One is to do with the emphasis of English language learning in China's education system. Since the late 1980s, ELT in China secondary schools has undergone pedagogical reforms with the aims of developing students' communicative competence. This change was reflected in the English curriculum of 1993 (Adamson & Morris 1997). However, according to the participants, the English language education they experienced in China, had a focus on learning grammatical rules, and memorizing vocabulary, and less attention was given to developing their listening and speaking skills. One participant remembered:

English education in China at that stage (secondary schooling) lays more emphasis on the foundation of grammar as well as the ability to read. Due to the lack of language environment, listening and speaking skills are usually lagging behind. (Vincent, autobiographical account)

In the participants' view and experience, the objectives of learning English in schools are to pass examinations in which the understanding of grammar rules and accuracy of reciting vocabulary are tested. The participants agreed that the teaching of English in secondary schools aimed to prepare them for the college entrance examination. With the objective of passing the examinations, students are not provided with opportunities to speak English and communicate in English. Some participants recalled:

At the age of twelve, I went to junior high school. Since then there was no real chance to speak English because it was not required in English examinations. (Li, autobiographical account)

The proficiency in English is measured by exams rather than the ability to use the language. The eight years I spent learning English have been wasted on taking exams, because I only focused on the things that could help me do better

in exams, such as grammar practice. Therefore, I have never thought about how to use the language and had the feeling that the exam is the purpose of learning the language. (Jo, autobiographical account)

Moreover, the participants also pointed out that there was a lack of an environment in which they could improve their communicative skills. They reported that their English language class in schools was taught predominantly in Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese. They seldom spent time outside of the class attending extra-curricular classes or activities that might have provided an opportunity to practise English language speaking and listening skills due to heavy course workload and examination pressure.

To some extent, different forms of English education across regions were identified by the participants as having disadvantaged their English learning. Some obtained their education in different locations since their family moved from rural China to cities, from inland to coastal cities. They noticed the distinctions in relation to English textbooks and teachers, and teaching approaches. Chris found it difficult when he moved to one coastal city to study, catching up with the rest of the class since English textbooks used in his previous school in an inland city were less advanced than the one in coastal cities. He also pointed out that students started to learn English earlier in coastal cities than in his home city. Jo, Celine, Holly, and Ridi experienced similar difficulties of learning English in cities. For instance, Jo recalled how outdated the English textbooks were in her hometown school to the extent that she was able to use her elder cousin's textbooks without purchasing new ones. Compared with students in big cities, some participants' English learning started one or two grade later. In some cities English classes in schools, especially primary schools, are more relaxed and linked to extracurricular activities in which students' competence in using English for communication is developed. Some participants reported that their English learning experience in schools and difficulties they encountered had a detrimental effect on their future learning:

I transferred to another private full-time boarding school in 1999. It is a big and beautiful school. I was studying in that school for six years (junior high school and senior high school). There was one English lesson taught by a foreigner teacher each week. The foreigner teacher just spoke English. It was not an effective way to improve my English, because I knew too little English to understand. Finally, my English developed very slowly. I really disliked English very much. I failed most of my English exams in those six years. (Holly, autobiographical account)

Compared with the students from big city, my spoken English was really bad. The English education in small cities like my hometown is mainly for the Entrance Exam. As it is not included in the exam, speaking was seldom taught or encouraged at all in high school. Therefore, after I began my English study in the university, I struggled to catch up with others in oral English. (Celine, autobiographical account)

In contrast, some participants had a relatively pleasant English learning experience. Ellie, grew up in a coastal metropolitan city in southern China, enjoyed her English studies in schools. The pleasure and joy of learning English were revealed in her positive account of English learning in schools:

... I was the student representative of English course in our class, so I took an active part in English study and maintained strong incentives ... to be fair, I benefited a lot from my English study at the secondary school. I was offered ample opportunities to practise my oral English and my scores in English course remained high (Ellie, autobiographical account)

Nonetheless English language proficiency appeared an issue in her study when she talked about her learning experiences in UK. She found it challenging to communicate her ideas precisely during group discussions and in daily conversation.

### **Current learning situation**

This section explores difficulties the participants encountered in their study in UK in relation to linguistic proficiency, learning and teaching styles, and academic writing. According to the data, the participants experienced academic culture shock at the outset in terms of linguistic competence, learning and teaching styles and academic writing. English competence has been a constant challenge in their study in UK, and they felt less confident of using English in communication and in writing. The learning, teaching and assessment methods in UK were different from the ones the participants had been accustomed to. Academic writing was perceived as most demanding aspect of language in their study in UK.

### ***Linguistic challenges***

There was a pronounced consensus among the participants that English proficiency has been an issue in their study in UK, although the level and area of difficulties may vary. A student's



prior English learning experiences have a huge impact on their learning in UK. Academic life in UK universities challenges their competence in English. Their English ability is tested in understanding lectures, discussing in seminars, and completing group work and individual assignments. The participants reported they found it difficult to fully understand lectures, to keep up with lecturers and other classmates in seminar discussions, to find appropriate words to express their ideas, and to fully comprehend reading materials. Taking into consideration the realities of English learning in China the problems seem unavoidable.

English language proficiency is also an issue associated with disciplinary studies. Lack of and unfamiliarity with disciplinary vocabulary and contexts were perceived to have caused problems in their acquisition and comprehension of subject knowledge. The participants voiced the obstacles that inadequate knowledge of subject-specific vocabulary and terminology was causing.

One of my degree subjects was Law. I have found it very difficult without high language proficiency. The study of Law requires a wide range of vocabulary and terminology. Also, you know that law practitioners and learners speak differently. It is very hard for me. (Mikki, interview)

I've found it difficult to understand some words in a different context. For example, the same word in accounting has a very different meaning from how it's normally understood. (Peter, interview)

You know, you can read novels and fiction very well but it's different for academic reading. For academic books, it's very difficult to get a grasp of what authors want to tell you – the underlining meanings of the text. My vocabulary is far from enough to cope with the demands of academic works. I have to read several times before I can come to terms with the meaning. (Rita, interview)

In order to cope with these problems, some participants reported to have read relevant literature on the topic extensively and beforehand while others looked up words in a dictionary.

The participants have acknowledged that English competence is more than a matter of knowing academic vocabulary; it involves understanding cultural aspects of the subjects. For instance, one participant stated:

Apart from the language problem, cultural difference is another challenging issue in my study life, which is generally impossible to overcome in a short period. Lack

of the basic cultural background makes it more difficult for me to understand the lesson. For example, in Stylistic class there are many cultural references such as a joke or some special connotations of words which confuse me a lot. (Jo, autobiographical account)

Culture, as ‘socially acquired knowledge’ (Alptekin, 1993, p.137), plays a significant role in cognition, which in turn considerably affects comprehension and interpretation.

Therefore, the awareness of cultural background would facilitate students’ understanding of a particular subject. Having a good knowledge of dictionary definitions of vocabulary is insufficient for students to comprehend new information, as Alptekin (1993) stated, lack of ‘culture competence,’ defined by Wallace (1988, p.33) as ‘a very complex package of beliefs, knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behaviour’ is the underlying issue here. For instance, one of the participants commented:

Even if I have learned English for many years, there are still a lot challenges. Lacking the knowledge of local culture and values is probably one of the problems. Sometimes, we found it difficult to understand the dialects, colloquial idioms and some pronunciations. Also we need to pay attention to various ideologies in order to express ourselves more clearly, for example towards politics: people from the East might have a different view from those from the West or a Muslim world. (Mia, autobiographical account)

Another interesting issue emerged from the data was the relationship between thinking and language. Do Chinese students think and form ideas in their native language, and then express them in English? One participant Peter found it quite a struggle to switch between his first language/dialect and English, and most of time he used his local dialect to help him thinking. For instance he recalls his mobile number in his dialect before reciting it in English. Another participant Mia recounted that she used Chinese to assist her in generating, planning and organizing ideas for writing. Holly remembered at the outset she read and wrote in Chinese, and then later translated the writing into English.

### ***Learning and teaching styles***

There are considerable differences in learning and teaching styles across culture. Chinese students adjusting to the academic life of UK universities need to adjust to western ideas of learning, and of pedagogical practice. From the data, it can be seen that the participants have

been aware of the differences in relation to the role of the teacher in students' learning, methods of teaching, learning strategies, and study skills being developed during learning.

The most salient difference identified by the participants was the role of the teacher in students' learning. Teachers in China, according to the participants, act as instructors who tell students what to do, and as an authority of knowledge. The Confucian teaching of hierarchical relationships is frequently cited as the source of the teacher's status and authority (e.g. Chan, 1999; Fischer, 2008; Turner, 2006). As discussed in Chapter 1, under the Confucian tradition students in the Chinese education system are generally expected to respect teachers and avoid contrasting ideas from the authority. In contrast, what the participants experienced in the UK was the tutor as knowledge facilitator, assisting students in their acquisition of knowledge, at the same time with the intention of developing students' independent learning skills. It is commonly understood that western universities aim to:

Increase individuals' capacity to learn, to provide them with a framework with which to analyse problems and to increase their capacity to deal with new information (Dawkins 1987, p.1)

... to look at problems from a number of different perspectives, to analyse, to gather evidence, to synthesize, and to be flexible, creative thinkers (Aulich, 1990, p.3).

As one participant commented:

Tutors here encourage students to be independent in the study. I remember I once took a module called History and Development of English. If we had any questions on the topic, tutors barely gave you any answers. They just guided you to think and find out answers by yourself. It was something new to me. (Mia, interview)

This western idea of teaching and learning is reflected in its approaches to teaching. In UK, a student-centred teaching approach is promoted, which is in contrast to the teacher-centred approach in China. The teaching style in Chinese education system is didactic and trainer/teacher-centred as Kirkbride and Tang (1992) note. Just like participants in Turner's study (2006) who perceived 'a structured, teacher-centred emphasis on propositional learning in China, compared to a more student-centred, discovery-based

procedural emphasis to learning in the UK' (p.37), participants of this research recollected the similar experience:

In China, in my experience, teachers tell you everything you need to know and learn and I was taught how to do things step by step in details. I was given all the necessary information I need in class, and I seldom did any additional reading after class and most of the information was given by teachers. However, in the UK, I'm required to be an independent learner and be responsible for my own study. Maybe we can say Chinese education is teacher-controlled-output-limited education because teacher controls the output. In contrast in UK is more student-oriented and input-limited education. (Alex, interview)

The teaching style is more relaxed. There are more interactions between the teachers and the students. Asking questions is encouraged anytime in class ... You can disagree with the teachers and even argue with them. They are willing to discuss about different opinions rather than only tell the 'correct' answer. (Jo, autobiographical account)

The approach of student-centred teaching is consolidated by the fact that there are seminars and tutorials in UK universities, in which students are offered opportunities to discuss and exchange ideas with tutors and ask questions. Teacher-student and student-student interactions are emphasized during seminars and tutorials, as one participant observed:

In the UK there are lectures and seminars while in China only lectures and also having lectures don't allow you to communicate with others. UK tends to have smaller class and seminars which allow students to communicate with other classmates and interact with tutors. It's quite informal here. (Vincent, interview)

The contrasting teaching and learning styles of UK higher education from those of their previous education proved a challenge for the participants. Some participants reported they found it difficult to take part in seminar discussions since they did not know how to pose and respond to a question. Too often, they kept silent during discussions. Some participants voiced how 'disoriented' they were with the extensive reading they were required to do and how they struggled to comprehend a particular issue without clear and explicit guidance from the tutor. However, with time, some participants reported, they gradually learned to adapt to and appreciate the new learning environment, and regarded the adjustment as one of the benefits of studying in UK. The participants appreciated the interactive learning and teaching practices. During the course of adjusting to the new learning and teaching style some participants saw the development of their independent

learning and study skills, research skills, time management skills, and communication skills apart from acquiring subject specific knowledge. But some participants expressed the view that it would have been more helpful and would have made their adjustment process less stressful if specific support provision had been in place upon their arrival and they had been informed what is expected for learning in higher education in UK.

The emphasis of approaches to learning is distinct between UK and China – a deep approach versus a surface approach. As identified in Chapter 3, a deep approach to learning is associated with interaction with learning materials, and identification of main ideas and underlying principles while a surface approach overlooks correlation of knowledge and concentrates on the completion of the tasks (Marton & Saljo, 1997; Entwistle *et al.*, 2001). The teaching methods adopted in UK universities tend to encourage and develop students' deep approach to learning – they are encouraged to read texts, and analyse issues critically. Memorizing texts promoted in education in China is often linked with a surface approach to learning, especially taking into consideration the examination-oriented education system in China. One participant recalled:

In China, we have an exam-oriented learning and teaching system with standard answers. Teachers emphasised the memorisation of textbooks. In UK, however, there is more presence of subjective questions in the exams/tests with no right or wrong answers, which encourage personal thinking and require personal judgement on things. (Ellie, interview)

However, it is important to differentiate memorizing from rote learning. Unlike Western presumption of memorizing in Chinese education, Chinese perceives memorisation as a means leading to understanding and comprehension, as reported in a number of previous studies (Biggs, 1996; Kember, 2000; Marton *et al.*, 1999; Watkins, 1996).

Differences were identified by the participant in terms of methods of assessment. Three major themes surfaced in relation to assessment. Firstly, in the UK, assessment takes the forms of coursework, examinations, in-class tests, presentations, and group projects, which are different from assessment methods in China where a formal examination is the main assessment method. Unlike various assessment components for one module in the UK, an end-of-term examination is often the only assessment component for one course in China.

Therefore, one examination would determine a student's final grade for the course, as one participant remarked:

I did not do very well in the exam, but I gained very high marks in the essay, which helped with the overall grade of the module. If that happened in China the final grade of the course would have been the marks I gained in the exam that was very low marks. I think the assessment methods are better designed here in the UK universities. (Vincent, interview)

The assessment methods in the UK provide the student with a second or third chance to improve their performance and final grades and ensure a failure in one examination or essay writing does not constrain their efforts.

Secondly, participants identified differences in terms of the content of examinations. In China, examinations tend to cover every aspect of one module and are very comprehensive, and students are required to answer all the questions. In contrast, the examination in the UK is inclined to test students' understanding of a particular topic or area, and students can select which question to answer.

Moreover, the majority of the participants thought that being given essay titles, presentation questions or group project tasks at the beginning of the term was a very good practice. It provided them with sufficient time to prepare for the assignments: they could start early to gather materials, plan and generate ideas, and consult tutors about the structure and theme of the writing. But a few participants also voiced a drawback: too much attention was given to preparing for the assignments, which meant that they overlooked other areas of the subject; and they felt intimidated by number of assignments that they were expected to complete in one academic term. Overall they were happy with the assessment methods in their current studies although they encountered different level of difficulties in adjusting to them during the course of study. The difficulties were caused by the combination of a number of factors – unfamiliarity with the assessment methods, not being clear about what they are expected to do, lack of confidence, and language competence.

### *Writing for academic purposes*

All participants saw academic writing as the most challenging part of their academic life in the UK. They were surprised by the length, number and variety of types of writing required and the research involved in preparing the writing. Two main reasons emerged from the data that contributed to their initial reaction towards academic writing. According to the participants, their prior English education in China did not prepare them well for the demands of academic writing in UK. As mentioned above, English education in secondary schools in China aims to prepare students for passing the college entrance examination with an emphasis on learning grammar rules, and memorizing vocabulary. Writing is given less attention since it constitutes very small portion of the examination. Some participants remarked:

I was scared for the first written assignment because I had never been asked to write a 3000 word essay before. I had no idea what was expected of me. (Maxine, interview)

Before coming to the UK, I had no idea of academic writing. In China, writing is sometimes simply for some tests. How to do the research? How to get the information you want? How to structure your essay? How to write it academically? Such questions always confused me at the beginning. (Celine, autobiographical account)

It was nothing near to my learning experience in China. (Li, autobiographical account)

Some participants had studied two years at university level in China. They commented they still struggled to meet the writing demands in UK. They highlighted the fact that minimal research was required to complete writing tasks in China – ‘we just write what we think about the topic without doing any research...’ (Li, interview) Their university study in China did not provide them with any appropriate training on academic writing in English with similar levels of writing requirements and standards as required in the UK higher education.

Also, when they came to the UK they did not receive any tuition on academic writing, and writing skills. The participants recalled they were not informed about what academic writing would involve and what tutors’ expectations were regarding the writing.

No one tells me what I should do, how to write, that I should do research before starting to write... I had no idea about referencing... I received very low marks on my first essay and I was so disappointed. (Andy, interview)

I did not know there were many types of written assignments with different requirements. I wasn't told what the differences were between essay writing and writing a report. (Holly, interview)

English language proficiency was reported to have caused problems in their academic writing, although it was not regarded as being a major issue. Previous research on L2 writing had similar findings that English language competence was least a concern for L2 writers (e.g. Jacobs, 1982; Zamel, 1984). Some participants were struggling between using formal and informal English; some were distressed by not being able to find an appropriate word to express what they meant; some found too many repetitive words in their writing; and some expressions in their writing were misunderstood by tutors. Unfamiliarity with disciplinary terminology was an obstacle. Their reading for writing was reported to have slowed down and understanding impaired since they spent more time consulting dictionary and textbooks. One participant commented:

I'm required to read widely in the field and find literature to support my views. It has proven a very difficult task for me. Reading and understanding the literature in my degree subject is very difficult. Psychology as a subject has a lot of unusual vocabulary and phrases. I spent most of my time checking the dictionary and trying to figure out what the term meant, then I found I had lost the whole picture of the texts. (Holly, interview)

The deficiency in using English was reported to have affected the quality of their writing. One participant remembered one of his final-year essays was marked down due to the poor usage of English (i.e. grammatical errors, wrong spellings, incorrect use of words and phrases, unclear expression of meanings) in spite of fine structure and demonstration of extensive research involved. This has attested to the findings of previous research that English language proficiency did have an impact on the overall quality of the written texts (e.g. Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996) although it was an 'additive factor' (Cumming, 1989, p.81).

The academic writing process was perceived by the participants as the most challenging in terms of generating ideas, organizing arguments, utilizing materials, and critically analysing scholars' work. They found themselves struggling to generate ideas for writing since they had



insufficient subject knowledge. In order to familiarize themselves with the knowledge related to the writing topics, they tended to read extensively, but it caused problems in forming their own ideas and organizing materials for writing.

I tried to read widely to help me have a whole picture of the topic, but it made me confused ... there are so many different opinions on the topic and eventually I even don't know what I think about the topic... it's very difficult to form the arguments.  
(Rita, interview)

The participants were accustomed to teacher's clear instruction and guidance on what they should acquire, and to extracting knowledge from core textbooks in their previous education. When in the UK they were faced with a large amount of reading and independent research, they found it overwhelming. They pointed out the difficulties they had in balancing quoting and citing other people's ideas with their own writing and analysis, and the confusion they had on the appropriate extent of quotation and citation that should be used in the writing.

Some participants found it difficult structuring the writing. The participants had a general idea of organizing the writing into introduction, main body and conclusion. However, like Yan, one of the participants from Angelova and Riazantseva's study (1999), some participants of this research did not realize different disciplines have different requirements on the organization of the writing. The participants of the research were undertaking combined degree studies, and very often they were struggling between two different disciplines.

Report writing required by my Business subject is quite different from essay writing for my English subject. I didn't know there was such a big difference between organizing a report and an essay (Ellie, interview).

The critical thinking and analysis required and stressed in academic writing in UK proved to be a challenge for some participants since they had minimal training in critical analysis and forming the arguments in their previous education. The participants had no clear understanding of what critical analysis means and what they were expected to do in their writing.

In most written works, tutors expect you to show critical thinking in your writing. For example, in the essay you're expected to raise your arguments and I struggle

with this a lot. I found the process of gathering arguments is such a suffering. (Rita, interview)

To write critically is a problem for me and I think my prior educational experience in China might have contributed to it. I may have been kind of writing critically in my prior learning, but, in China, writing is just to write what you think without much research involved. (Vincent, interview)

The participants were aware of the concepts of academic discourse and discourse community. However they pointed out that they had limited knowledge of how to write in a different discourse community from the one they were used to, and of what they were expected by their academic discipline.

Plagiarism is another issue that emerged from the data analysis. Chinese students have been stereotyped culturally as being prone to plagiarizing and copying (Sowden, 2005; Wyrick, 2001). However, the participants of the research were aware that plagiarism is a serious offence in the academic community and proper acknowledgement of appropriate sources is required. They understood that it is wrong to borrow or copy others' work without proper referencing and they were taught not to plagiarize in their previous education in China. The difference between their experience in China and UK concerning plagiarism, the participants remarked, was the level of seriousness. The offence of plagiarism was not taken seriously by teachers in China. There was a lack of clear policy regarding plagiarism at institution level in China, one participant recalled, in that 'you would unlikely receive any punishment if you had been found plagiarising in the writing.'

Closely related to the issue of plagiarism is the proper referencing system. The participants voiced the confusion they had with different systems required by different disciplines. The difficulties were reported to have caused by lack of experience of using referencing systems in their previous education and of clear instruction provided by tutors on how to reference appropriately in the UK. Some participants commented:

I'm always confused with the different referencing systems. Some of my modules require MLA referencing and others ask for Harvard referencing. In China I had never come across these different referencing styles (Jo, interview)

We were told to use Harvard referencing but the tutor didn't give us examples of what Harvard referencing is. So I searched it on the internet... but it turned out there were slight differences from what my tutor requires (Mikki, interview)

Previous studies (Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1987, 1989; Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1982; Wang & Wen, 2002) have found that the native language was commonly used in the composing process of L2 writing; the students employed their first language to help plan the writing, generate ideas and content, check style, and assist thinking. The participants of the research reported they had used Chinese to assist their writing. Like the students in Wang and Wen's study (2002), Chinese was used by the participants mainly in the process of planning the writing, generating and organizing the ideas. One participant mentioned at the beginning she had used Chinese to construct sentences, and then translate them into English, but with time and improvement of her English language competence, she had no longer used Chinese in generating texts. This is in correlation with the findings of Wang and Wen's study (2002) in which involvement of native language in texts construction decreased with the development of the students' English language proficiency.

### **Aspirations for the future**

After the acquisition of English as their second language or third language, students in the study showed aspirations for a future associated with this linguistic advantage. For many, the high proficiency of English language had prepared them well for a further postgraduate degree study in an English speaking country in the near future. For others, the influence of English on their future aspirations has gone further. Louis, in the interviews, expressed that he would look for the opportunity to participate in international trade after his study in the UK. His confidence came from the fact that he had mastered not only the English language but also the culture associated with it. Celine aimed to promote the cultural and intellectual understandings of China in the West. She decided to study further on subjects associated with Chinese history and culture at SOAS, at the University of London. Andy had long hoped to teach Chinese in English speaking countries, and his confidence in using English had provided him with the possibility.

The learning experience in the UK has helped these Chinese students broaden their views on cultures and democratic societies. In this study, there was evidence that these Chinese students had developed a social and cultural sophistication through their knowledge and experience of two different civilisations.

## Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the participants' learning experiences in UK higher education. Three arguments have been presented: a) their previous English language education could not sufficiently meet the language demands required; b) participants found it challenging to adapt to the learning, teaching and assessment methods; c) academic writing was perceived as the most demanding part in their academic life.

According to the participants, English language proficiency causes problems in their learning in UK. In China they had found that English language education in secondary schools was aimed to prepare students for passing college entrance examinations, with a focus on learning grammar rules and vocabulary, and the accuracy of written language at sentence level. Less attention was given to develop students' speaking and writing skills at a more holistic level. So when they came to the UK, the participants lacked competence to communicate with local students, and to be involved in seminar discussions. Too often they were misunderstood by tutors as to what they meant either during the conversations or in writing. Unfamiliarity with disciplinary terminology was causing problems in their understanding of subject knowledge and in the processing of reading and writing. Difficulties were caused, as reported by the participants, by lack of British culture. Their acquisition and understanding of the subject knowledge was hindered by the lack of and unfamiliarity with local culture.

Learning, teaching and assessment methods differ across cultures. The participants were aware of the differences between China and British learning and teaching styles and assessment methods. In the UK students are encouraged to develop independent learning skills while in China students tend to be taught what to do step by step. The participants welcomed the British learning and teaching styles but pointed out the difficulties in adjusting to this new learning and teaching styles. Critical thinking and analysis, required in British education practice, were what the participants reported lacking. The participants, accustomed to follow one or two core textbooks in their previous education, found them 'disoriented' by the extensive reading they were expected to undertake. The participants reported they had taken advantage of different assessment methods available in the UK. They found it easy to manage the examination questions in UK since they were given options to choose which questions they would prefer to answer, which was different from the practice in China. That the final grade for one module was accumulative of marks of different components was

perceived better practice than that in China where one examination or one essay would constitute the assessment of the whole module.

Academic writing proved to be most demanding. Linguistic proficiency has been an underlying factor in the challenges Chinese students face in other aspects of the academic writing process. As the data suggests, the participants' English language competence was challenged during the process of completing their written assignments. Some participants mentioned they were struggling to find an appropriate word to express their ideas and too many repetitive words were used in their writing. Academic writing became more challenging when they were faced with a lack of disciplinary terminology and unfamiliarity with academic conventions. They were unclear what tutor's expectations are and how to write for a certain academic community. The obstacles occurred during reading for writing and in the process of writing. They were distressed by not being prepared for the extensive reading that is involved in preparing for writing, and not being able to digest the large amount of reading at a short time. During the writing, challenges emerged in relation to text organization and structure, coherence, organizing relevant materials, referencing and English language usage.

Despite these problems and challenges that they faced, the participants showed positive attitudes towards learning in the UK. There was talk of making efforts and taking measures to tackle problems and of the joy of their managing to have overcome the difficulties.

Their proficiency of English language has motivated these Chinese students to participate in the international communication and understanding after their study in the UK.

In the next chapter, I explore how they may have become independent learners.

## **CHAPTER 8: BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT LEARNER**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is on the student participants' transformation to becoming an independent learner through exploring their motivations to learn and capabilities developed during their study in the UK. According to the data analysis, the participants' decision to study in the UK was shaped by a number of factors in relation to their origin, the destination country and anticipated advantages; learning in a cosmopolitan and multicultural environment was highlighted by the participants to be beneficial to their personal and academic development; the experience facilitated the development of their self and intercultural awareness, and a sense of futurity.

### **Motivation and purposefulness**

The significance of education is underlined in Chinese traditions, where the value of education lies in self-fulfilment and personal enjoyment. Confucian teaching emphasizes the personal joy of learning, as shown in 'he who knows the truth [knowledge] is not equal to him who loves it, and he who loves it is not equal to him who delights in it' (The Analects VI. XX). However the 'dimension of external manifestation and utility of education' (On, 1996, p.37) is also stressed in Chinese traditions, like the correlation between a person's internal establishment and external performance. Education is, in this sense, regarded as an important approach towards upward social mobility. For the participants of this research, their motivation of studying in the UK was deeply rooted in the intrinsic value of education in Chinese tradition.

### ***Reasons for studying in the UK***

Why do many Chinese students study in the UK and other western universities? In order to answer this question, I am going to apply the 'Push and Pull' model (McMahon, 1992) to the analysis of research data collected from the interviews and student autobiographical accounts. 'Push' factors operate within the source country and propel a student to decide to study overseas. 'Pull' factors operate within a host country to make that country appealing to international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). A combination of various factors has driven Chinese students to study overseas. According to the data, major 'push' factors include the limited capacity of universities in China, and student's dissatisfaction with learning and teaching in universities in China. In conjunction with the above two push

factors, two other driving elements emerged from the data analysis: parents' influence, and personal and career aspirations.

Admission to a university in China is very competitive. It is widely believed that there is a lack of university places in higher education institutions (HEI). For instance, latest statistics (2009) show that 10.2 million high school leavers sat the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) in July 2009, however, there were only 6.29 million places available in HEIs, and 3.91 million students who missed an opportunity for a university place in China. Studying overseas then becomes an alternative option for students whose family have considerable wealth. As one participant recalled:

I didn't do well in the NCEE. I wasn't able to go to a good university in China. When my parents asked if I wanted to study overseas, I thought it would be a good idea to have a new beginning. It's not a problem for my parents financially to support my study in the UK. (Holly, interview)

Also, China's one-child policy, launched in 1979, made it possible for the only child of a family like Holly to have the opportunity to study overseas since their parents have no other child to support.

Those students who had managed to enter universities in China were very critical of their experience in Chinese higher education, even those who enrolled in one of the top universities in China. The majority of student participants (14 out of 18) in this research had already enrolled in a prestigious Chinese university before they chose to transfer their undergraduate study to England on a 2+2 exchange programme. These 14 students were studying at the School of Translation and Interpretation in their Chinese university. English language study was the core element of their degree. The participants expressed their discontent with the experiences they had in their first two years in the university in China. Some participants said they were not happy with the curriculum design of the degree: the modules the university offered in the first two years were irrelevant to the practice of translation and interpretation; and there was too much focus on theory and less on its application. The participants envisaged that studying in the UK would provide them with better learning experiences. One participant remarked:

My study in China was not what I had expected. I came to know from books and my friends' experience that education in the UK tends to develop the learner's

independent study skill, and there are more modules to choose from and more flexibility in choosing which modules to study (Chris, interview)

Parents' influence on the participants' decision to study overseas was apparent in this research. The influence might even have started at an early age of their children. Mikki, the only child in the family, described how her parents shaped her choice of studying in Japan and England in an interview:

You also can say that my parents have had a major say in my decision making regarding overseas study. I have been a good girl. My parents wanted me to have some experiences of different cultures, but they did not want me to study too far away from them, that was why they sent me to study in Japan during my school year. However, for the sake of career prospect, my parents suggested that I should concentrate on learning English rather than Japanese. So after two years in Japan, I was sent to England to continue my study at undergraduate level. (Mikki, interview)

The anticipated benefits of studying in the UK to their future career prospect and personal development also drove the participants to study in the UK. Their parents are well aware of the benefits that British qualifications would bring to their children's future economic and social status. The participants also understand that a qualification from universities in the UK would enhance their career prospects, and would make them more competitive in the job market, as one participant put it: 'when I go back to China after my graduation I would be better situated to get a decent job.' This perception is deeply rooted in the Chinese traditions of education being a major approach to upward social mobility. Some participants with the aspiration of conducting international business in the future saw studying in the UK as an opportunity to learn western culture and build international links. One student participant remarked:

My parents are doing some export business to Europe. I thought studying in the UK would enable me to gain understanding of western markets, and it's about networking as well, I could meet people from different cultural background ... which would help my parents' business. (Louis, interview)

Some participants saw studying in the UK as an opportunity to become more independent and build their self-confidence. The majority of the participants are the only child in their family, which gave them minimal chances to develop their own independence. So the participants regarded studying in the UK as an opportunity to become independent and autonomous.



I believed that it would be more challenging living in a new environment and studying under a completely different education system. I always aspire to be more independent and adaptable. Studying abroad would provide me with this opportunity to be independent. (Vincent, autobiographical account)

Others regarded it as a steppingstone towards undertaking further studies. One participant expressed:

It's easier after my undergraduate studies here for me to go on master's or research studies and studying here provides me a better platform. I would be better prepared and more familiar with the learning environment here in the UK (Vincent, interview)

Some participants voiced their keenness to broaden their life experience, which studying in the UK would help achieve. Celine articulated in the interview that she was interested in finding out the perceptions of the West towards China's current affairs and history.

I was interested to have a look at how people from the outside world see China, and how they viewed the history of China. (Celine, autobiographical account)

In conjunction with the 'push' factors mentioned above, the 'pull' factors discussed below have influenced the participants' decision to choose the UK as their study destination. As discussed in Chapter 2 - Contexts of destination-- the UK HEIs have been experiencing rapid changes because of marketisation and internationalisation of higher education driven by economic benefits; the UK, as one of the most popular study destinations for international students, has been promoting the 'pull' factors to attract more international students. Mazzarol (2002) has identified six 'pull' factors that influenced student selection of a host country to study overseas – knowledge and awareness of the host country and its institutions, personal recommendations, cost issues, attractive campuses, geographic proximity and social links. For Chinese students in this research, some of these 'pull' factors have contributed to their decision to study in the UK while others have been proven irrelevant.

The participants were attracted to choose the UK as their study destination by its reputation of the excellence in learning, teaching and research, and high quality of academic staff. Students and parents in China are generally familiar with many top UK universities like Cambridge, Oxford, LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science), Imperial College of London, and University of Liverpool and so on, and familiar with stories of famous people studying in the UK. One participant recalled:

I can't really remember when it was that I started to consider studying abroad, but I always regarded it as one of my dreams. I was inspired by the story of Isaac Newton, and as a child, I did dream of going to Cambridge University some day, where Newton had studied and worked. (Kent, autobiographical account)

The participants perceived that studying in the UK would maximize their opportunities to improve their English language competence and understanding of British culture. Studying in the UK provided the participants with a learning environment where they would have opportunities to use the language on a daily basis, and at the same time they would acquire subject knowledge. Especially since the participants acknowledged the important role culture played in English language learning, they felt that studying in the UK would enhance their appreciation of British culture, and therefore help improve their English language proficiency. Some participants stated:

When I went to Guangzhou to study, I didn't speak any Cantonese. In order to learn the language or, let's say, the dialect, I kept listening to the radio; watching Cantonese TV programmes; and listening to others talk. Gradually, I could understand and speak the language. Likewise, I thought if I want to improve my English, studying in the UK would be a good idea since it provides a good English-speaking environment. (Peter, interview)

I chose to study here because I thought it would be very good opportunities to improve my English if I can study in the country that this language originates from. (Celine, autobiographical account)

Recommendation from friends and family relatives was one of the major factors that had an impact on the participants' choice of studying in this particular institution in the UK. Those student participants who were on 2+2 exchange programmes chose Liverpool Hope University as a study destination institution partly due to advice from graduates of the university and positive feedback of the previous cohort of students who studied there. Others mentioned that their relatives recommended the university to them since their children had studied at the institution.

I have explored the 'push' and 'pull' factors which had shaped the student participants' decision to study in the UK. The participants were driven to study overseas by the lack of university places in China, and dissatisfaction with education in China. Parental influence and individual aspiration in terms of personal development and career prospects motivated the students to study in the UK. In the next section, I will examine the benefits the student participants have received after

they spent some time studying in the UK. In my interpretation, I am going to draw on the idea of cosmopolitan learning.

### ***Cosmopolitan learning – benefits of studying in the UK***

The idea of cosmopolitanism is not new but it offers the new potential to address the relationship between contemporary global connectivity and education. Encouraging students to examine the meaning of their intercultural experiences, and to seek to locate them within the transnational networks that have become so much part of the contemporary era of globalization, cosmopolitan learning ‘represents an aspiration that seeks to develop a different perspective on knowing and interacting with others within the changing context of the cultural exchanges produced by global flows and networks’ (Rizvi, 2009, p.264). The following section reveals the major benefits the student participants have gained in the cosmopolitan learning environment.

It emerged from the data that studying in the UK has helped develop the student participants’ independent study skills. In comparison with teacher-led learning that prevailed in China education system, students are encouraged to develop independent learning and self-directed learning skills in the UK HE. The participants voiced the difficulties they encountered at the outset while adapting to the new learning expectations the UK HE had of them. However, with time, the participants learned to become independent learners. One participant expressed:

Studying overseas has made me understand the meaning of being a university student, and university is a place where you can develop skills, obtain knowledge and improve yourself. In the last two years’ study, I found myself become more independent in the study. (Alex, interview)

The participants identified a number of independent learning skills they had developed. The participants said that they came to realize that the responsibility for learning lies with themselves. They learned to be active in the process of learning - using their own initiative to organize their learning in the best possible way – and in the process they have developed their time management and organization skills. Completing an academic writing task provided the participants with opportunities to develop their independent research and information retrieval skills. One participant remarked:

In order to meet the writing requirements, I have to read extensively and do a lot of research in the library. Now I have learnt how to retrieve information on my own ... no longer as before I am dependent on tutors and read only core text books. (Maxine, interview)

Moreover, they have learnt to be analytical and critical, which was what they are expected to achieve in learning in the UK HE. Compared with before, according to the participants, they have been able to evaluate and assess the information they retrieved and make decisions on what is relevant and what is irrelevant to a specific topic; they felt more confident in critically assessing materials they gathered and forming their own arguments.

Extensive and broad reading expected in the academic writing, the participants perceived, has improved their reading skills. The participants expressed their writing skills have shown considerable improvements. They firmly believed that improved writing not only assisted their understanding of subject knowledge but also benefited their future career development, as one participant remarked:

My tutor back in China commented on my writing, and he said my way of writing is more smooth and easy to read. I consider this is quite an achievement. In my view, writing well is very important in whatever profession I opt to take up later. (Mia, interview)

Studying in the UK has helped the participants develop their interpersonal skills and cross-cultural communication skills. Interpersonal skills refer to abilities one has developed to interact well with others, including communication skills, listening skills and assertiveness. Studying in the UK HE, a student will be interacting with people from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Good interpersonal skills would facilitate their learning in the university but also provide long-term benefits to their future professional development. That is where the cross-cultural communication skills fit in. In addition, cosmopolitan learning requires a greater intercultural understanding and communication. Effective cross-cultural communication requires intercultural sensitivity and empathy. The participants have learnt to recognize the importance of cultural awareness in interpersonal communication. They have learnt to respect and appreciate different cultures in the process of communicating with students from many different countries. One participant commented:

I didn't realize how diverse the students are in the UK university before I came here. In my class there are students from some European countries, India, Pakistan, and Nigeria ... we have group projects together, which enable me to

get to learn their culture and to learn how to communicate with them. (Jo, interview)

The participants in the interview highlighted the development of their cross-cultural communication skills, and reported they used various techniques to avoid cultural misunderstanding and misconception. One participant expressed the approaches she used to communicate with her classmates from different cultural backgrounds:

I tend to listen carefully and speak slowly to make sure what I understand is correct and what I want to say is expressed clearly. I read some articles on East European cultures on the Internet and tried to avoid any discomfort my questions or behaviour would cause during our conversation (Holly, interview).

The participants also stressed studying in the UK and communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds enabled them to have enhanced the comprehension of their own culture. Mutual respect and understanding facilitates cross-cultural communication. In learning to appreciate other people's culture, the participants explained, they have come to a better picture of Chinese culture and values. In order to develop a better understanding of other cultures, the participants have learnt to reflect on their own culture and consolidate the knowledge of their own cultural values since the cross-cultural communication offers them an opportunity and requires them to introduce Chinese culture and traditions to others. 'All cultural understanding is comparative,' in Rizvi's (2009, p.267) words 'because no understanding of others is possible without self-understanding.'

According to the participants, their English language competence in communication has improved greatly compared with the level of English language proficiency prior to studying in the UK. One of the major issues with English education in China is its minimal attention to the student's development of communicative skills. Studying in the UK, the participants averred, had maximized their opportunities to practise their English speaking and communication skills in both academic and informal settings. The participants found it less difficult to construct sentences during a conversation since they had a very solid foundation in the knowledge of grammar rules. However, at the outset, they found it quite challenging to speak fluently and with clear expression. With time, the participants felt an increased English language competence. They also highlighted the importance of their increased cultural awareness and understanding in improving their communication skills in English. It is a sense of confidence they have developed, as one participant stated:

It is not merely a matter of lack of vocabulary or grammar understanding, I think, it is the confidence and self-belief. I was very afraid of speaking in English in public or having a conversation with people initially, then I took every opportunity to speak to my classmates and tutors. Gradually I overcame that nervousness... and also practice makes perfect. (Jo, interview)

Learning in the cosmopolitan and multicultural settings helped the participants develop a global outlook, intellectual confidence, independence in learning and critical thinking. Their competence in cross-cultural communication skills was reported to have improved greatly. The participants also identified two major individual capabilities they have developed during studying in the UK, which are to be discussed in the next section.

## **Capabilities**

At the outset, it is worthwhile elucidating what capabilities mean. The Higher Education for Capability Forum (HEC) understands the idea of capabilities as skills, competence and knowledge, which once developed during the university learning, can be used and applied to the ever changing and complex circumstances outside the education setting (Stephenson 1992). In other words, it means a set of transferable skills. Unlike HEC's understanding of capabilities, Amartya Sen (1992, 1999, 2002) saw capabilities not as skills but as one's freedom to be and do. The notion of capabilities, as Dreze and Sen (1995) argued, 'is essentially one of freedom – the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead.' Capability represents a person's freedom to choose a kind of life that is self-considered valuable. The capability approach, in the context of higher education, focuses on students' 'own reflective, informed choice of ways of living that they deem important and valuable, and the self-determination of ends and values in life' (Walker, 2006, p.21). In this section, I am interested to use the capability approach in the field of higher education to explore what capabilities the Chinese participants had developed during their study in the UK. Three major capabilities emerged from the data – being able to make informed decisions, self and intercultural awareness, and a sense of futurity.

### ***Informed decision-making***

Studying in the UK has enabled the participants to make an informed decision on their future academic and professional development. Being away from home and from the convenience

of consulting with their parents had provided the participants with the space to think and deliberate on what they really want to pursue in the future. It is a sense of agency that is being gradually fostered in the participants. Agency is defined as one's ability to pursue goals that they value and are important for the life they wish to lead (Walker, 2006). Their decision-making took advantage of and took into consideration the experiences they had and skills they gained in their learning in the UK HE. Likewise studying in the UK contributes to development of their ability to make decisions on the directions they want their future to take.

Many participants chose to undertake further studies in the UK after their completion of undergraduate studies. The experience of undergraduate studies in the UK, as expressed by the participants, not only enabled them to have become familiar with and adapt to the UK education system, but also developed their confidence to undertake further studies. They had a clear picture of what they want to do next in their academic development, and how the further studies would benefit their future choices in career development. Some participants commented:

I just found it's clear for me what I should pursue. I think that's about business and management and before I came here I had no idea what I should do after graduation. Now I think I will choose to study a master's in business and management, which will certainly increase my career prospects. It's also one of the benefits of studying here. I felt more confident of what I'm studying and also I have more informed decisions and know where I would go in the future.  
(Vincent, interview)

After my Bachelor's degree in Hope, I want to move to another city in UK and continue my Master degree in the area of Business. Three years studying in UK will enhance lots of my skills, Another Chinese friend and I even operate a small B2C (business to customer) web site in China. We tried to design a model of online business in the market of University students in China, and then hired some peers to build a website for us, applying the knowledge I have learn to use in the real world. The veil covering the future is unveiled gradually, the picture of life is painted more and more colourful, but still there is a lot of mist and thorns on the road. I like life like this, above the horizon, everything is bright and clear. I believe I will also become stronger, fly through the cloud and enjoy the sunshine. (Peter, autobiographical account)

The capability of making informed decisions is also reflected on their choice of subjects for postgraduate studies. With the dream of pursuing their long-time interests, Andy and Celine had decided to study Chinese literature and history at master's level in a university in London. Others do not understand why they chose to study Chinese literature and history in Britain, and they think the best place to study Chinese-related

subject is in China. However, Andy and Celine were determined and did not regret their decision. They firmly believed that they had made the right choice. As Beatie Bryant has ‘achieved a fragile sense of agency’ (Nixon, 2005, p.137), Celine in the following autobiographical account has demonstrated her ability to choose what she really wants to do.

Another thing that impresses me during my study in the UK is the way people here view Chinese history. In China, most criticisms and descriptions of Chinese history are written by Chinese scholars; some of the studies are even controlled by the government, while here, most of them are from different scholars all over the world. I am so impressed by these different views, for they are quite different and objective from how I have been educated. Moreover, having experienced perceiving China as refracted through the minds and opinions of outsiders, I feel that the vantage point from which I can critically evaluate the motives for interpreting and disseminating Chinese history is especially privileged. I feel it is essential that I pursue the study of this outside of China. Given the current precariousness of China’s self-perception, there is limited space for objectivity in the critical evaluation of its history. I have greatly enjoyed and been consistently fascinated by the literature I have read on the subject of Chinese history while in the UK, most of which has been written and published outside of China and is therefore unavailable for consultation there. Moreover, the study of Chinese history in the UK can also help me to improve my English. Further, it may help to improve my translation skill, as I may need to read both Chinese and English texts all the time. Therefore, I have made the decision to study Chinese history here in the UK. I know that the decision may meet some opposition. But hopefully, I can face it and insist on my own decision to pursue what I am really interested in. (Celine, autobiographical account)

Not all the participants decided to continue their studies in the UK. Not influenced by others’ choices, Jo decided to return to China and find a job after her graduation. Jo had a number of reasons to explain her decision to pursue a professional career. The most salient reason Jo identified was she has realized what would be the best for her future. Reflecting upon her learning experience in China and in the UK, she regarded the career she was about to embark on would help her to discover ‘a new and more meaningful purpose of life’ (Jo, autobiographical account).

### ***Self and intercultural awareness***

Increasing globalization and internationalization requires the recognition of cultural diversity and the development of intercultural understanding. People are encouraged by the ever changing and diverse environment to learn to respect others’ culture and values. Intercultural



awareness or intercultural understanding means the reconstruction of the context of the foreign, taking the others' perspective and seeing things through others' eyes (Bredella, 2003, p.39). Self-awareness is fostered in the process of the cultivation of intercultural awareness. The development of self and intercultural awareness is closely associated with the capability approach, and its valuable beings (capabilities) and doings (functionings). Being intercultural is to have the capability to 'reflect on the relationships among groups and the experience of those relationships. It is both the awareness of experiencing otherness and the ability to analyse the experience and act upon the insights into self and other which the analysis brings' (Alred, Bryam & Fleming, 2003, p.4). Cultivation of being intercultural and of intercultural awareness would encourage awareness and self-reflection of one's own culture, although not necessarily would lead to it.

The student body in the classroom of the UK HE is becoming increasingly heterogeneous and internationalized. As reviewed in the context chapter, students attending universities come from diverse cultural, educational and social backgrounds. The diversity of the student body requires one's appreciation of different cultures of others and development of intercultural awareness. Students have to learn to work with people from different cultural and educational backgrounds, and to recognize and appreciate the difference and diversity. As Alred *et al.* (2003, p.5) argue, intercultural experience is not sufficient for intercultural understanding; there must be reflection, analysis and action.

Studying in the UK provided the student participants the opportunities to develop their intercultural understanding, which helped to enhance their self-awareness and awareness of their own culture. The participants stated that, in the process of interacting with students from different cultural background and experiencing different social and cultural viewpoints in the UK, they were able to view Chinese culture and values from different perspectives. Their beliefs and values were constantly challenged during intercultural interaction. The intercultural experience has helped the participants to realize how their value systems have been shaped by their own culture. For instance, Jo in the interviews reflected how she thought of different attitudes towards desire, sex and spending.

I think I have changed a lot on many beliefs. One thing in particular is about enjoying life. In China, we advocate working hard, very hard and I used to believe it's the way of life. The prior education taught me we should condemn the idea of enjoying life too much and it's associated with western corrupted

ideology. However, after the two-year study, I start to think why it is wrong to enjoy our life after work. I found people here know how to enjoy themselves. After work, they tend to put more time in their family life. I start to think about the purpose of life. I think it's more important to spend time with family. Another thing is the change of attitude towards sex. In China, we don't talk about sex very much in schools. I feel like it's almost a taboo to have a discussion about sex. From my observation, in the UK, people are very liberal about sex and it's ok to talk about it. It seems like it is part of their daily life. I have developed a new understanding about sex. Thirdly, I realise there is such a difference of people's attitude towards spending and saving. In the UK, people tend to spend more and save less. I think it is maybe because the UK is a welfare society. People are looked after from cradle to grave. In China, people have to earn first and consume later. You can argue that China has a lack of welfare support but I still insist it is right to save first and consume later. This belief hasn't been changed-- instead it's reinforced. (Jo, interview)

Through comparison and contrasting, they were able to develop a new understanding of their cultural beliefs. The participants did not completely agree with all the cultural values and attitudes they have experienced. They tended to assess the cultural values critically, and reflect upon their own, and eventually form their own judgement.

After first three months, I had some thinking in December 2008 on what I needed to do in a different culture and learning environment. I then thought that I don't have to like all of British culture, in particular the drinking culture. (Peter, interview)

In addition, intercultural awareness has shaped the participants' perception of China's current affairs and politics. They were exposed to the different viewpoints and interpretations on China's affairs through media coverage. They were provided with opportunities to recognize how they are viewed by others of different cultures. They commented that they have learnt to view things with critical eyes, which helped to develop their own worldviews.

My experience in the UK has indeed changed some of my beliefs toward certain things. For example, I have changed my attitude toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). I used to think it's a very good party. I'm not a CCP member by the way. However, I now changed my view toward it. I believe it has both advantages and disadvantages. (Mia, interview)

I think I have changed my view greatly towards Chinese politics. Initially, I saw Chinese affairs as black and white. It's probably to do with my prior education. I was taught to see things with a given interpretation. I wasn't required to look at things critically and differently. However, after the two-year study in England, I now see things differently. There is a realisation that every issue is more complicated than it seems. (Celine, interview)

Self and intercultural awareness might also cause frustration and disappointment.

I'm disappointed with things are not as I initially perceived them. Sometimes it's very difficult to change your own belief on certain things although you have realized its cons ... (Celine, interview)

The self-awareness of one's own culture is in parallel with the awareness of others' culture. Intercultural awareness encourages self- reflection of the participant's own culture and values, hence the recognition of advantages and limitations of their own culture. Likewise, self-awareness of themselves as a cultural being allows the participants to view others' culture critically, and empowers the participants to make informed and well-reasoned choices.

### **Sense of futurity**

The Oxford dictionary defines futurity as the future, the quality or condition of being in or of the future. During their study in the UK, the student participants have developed a sense of futurity – facing the unpredictable future with confidence. It was emerged from the data that they recognized the unpredictability of the future, unlike in the past, the time before they came to the UK, when they faced the future with apprehension, after a few years' experiences in the UK they become more confident, and are able to face the unpredictable with composure, prudence and confidence.

Before coming to the UK, some participants recalled, they were confused about their future, and doubted their ability to cope with the uncertainties since they had been told and taught what to do by the seniors, and they had not been given opportunities to be independent.

At that time, I was afraid what would happen if one day there was no more guidance from parents, and tutors. Believe it or not, the university I chose to study in China was a direct result of my school tutor's influence. Now I become more confident to make my own decision about the future. Although the future is still uncertain, I'm now more prepared to face it. (Mia, interview)

Studying in the UK, as Mia expressed in the interview, has helped them develop a sense of futurity, and equip them with abilities to overcome any difficulties the future may hold.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the participants' becoming an independent learner. The participants were driven to study in the UK by a combination of push and pull factors including the limited university places in China, dissatisfaction with the education system in China, their parents' influence, anticipated benefits to their personal development and career prospects, English language development, UK universities' reputation of excellence in teaching, learning and research, and recommendations from relatives and friends.

The cosmopolitan learning enables the participants to develop a global outlook, intellectual confidence, independence in learning and critical thinking. The participants have learnt to use their own initiative and take control of their learning. They have developed the abilities to conduct independent research, to retrieve information, and critically assess the materials relevant to a particular topic. The participants expressed the hope that the learning abilities they gained would provide them with long-term benefits in whatever they chose to do in the future. Moreover, they also highlighted the development of their interpersonal skills and cross-cultural communication skills. They have learnt to appreciate cultural differences and recognize the importance of mutual understanding in relation to efficient cross-cultural communication.

In addition to the independent learning and interpersonal skills, the participants have developed a sense of being more in control of their life, possessing 'attainable options' and 'a language of freedom' (Gaspar & Van Staveren, 2003, p.144, 145). They were able to make informed decisions in terms of their future, which they considered valuable and important to themselves. Studying in the UK enabled the participants to have intercultural experience and encounters. Being intercultural is more than experiencing the interculturality, as Alred *et al.* (2003) have argued, it is about intercultural awareness and understanding - being able to analyze the intercultural encounters, reflect upon the experiences and one's own culture, and take actions. The intercultural awareness and understanding was perceived important in relation to the development of participants' self-awareness. By developing intercultural awareness, the participants were able to make a 'more qualitative judgement' (Alred *et al.* 2003, p.4) about the nature of intercultural experiences, and to develop insights into themselves and others through reflection, analysis and action. The participants highlighted in

the interview that they have developed the capability to make informed choices and interpretations by drawing on different cultural perspectives and reflecting upon their own cultural system.

The participants have become more self-confident. They have developed the essential skills and capacities to cope with difficulties, and they have become capable of making independent choices. They have learnt not to be afraid, facing the uncertainty of the future with confidence and conviction.

## **PART IV – REFLECTIONS**

This part includes a single concluding chapter (Chapter 9) which draws out some wider implication of the study for the education of overseas students within UK higher education. The structure of this chapter is as follows:

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

This chapter brings together the three themes discussed in previous chapters and explores the implications for higher education institutions. I reflect on the research and explore what institutional conditions are needed to ensure overseas students have the opportunity to succeed in their learning, in terms of the implications for institutional and departmental support and for professional practice. The relevance of this research for other groups of international students is also discussed.

By addressing the research question (What transformations do Chinese undergraduate students undergo within a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning settings?) Figure 9.1 provides a conceptual framework to analyse their learning experiences within a historico-cultural perspective. Such a perspective is important since the students' motivation, values, skills, and knowledge are all historically constructed. This conceptual re-framing evolved from the original analytical framework as presented in Figure 4.1. The re-framing highlights the historical nature of the 'learning journeys' undertaken by the students.

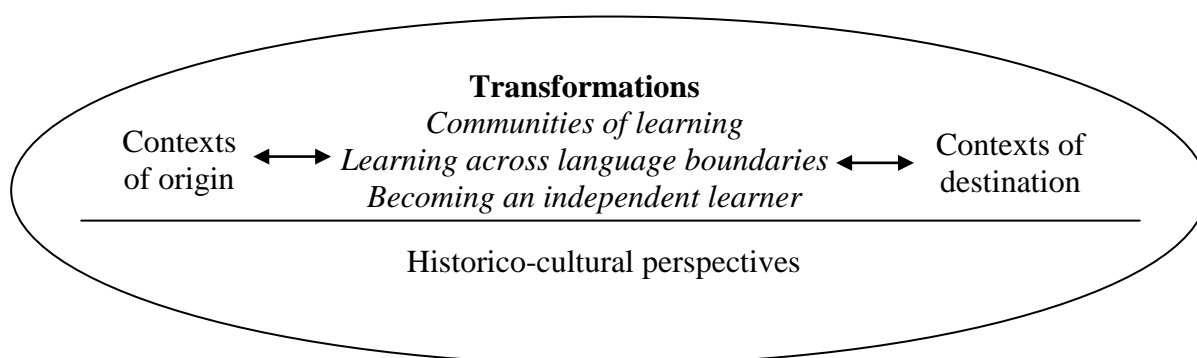


Figure 9.1: Conceptual framework of Chinese students' learning experiences

In the next section, I summarise the findings of this study and discuss the relevance of the study to other groups of international students.

## Summary of the findings – drawing the threads together

The findings of this study can be illustrated in Table 9.1. The table presents the 18 Chinese students' perceptions of their own transformations.

	Chinese culture oriented	↔	UK culture oriented
Communities of learning	x x x x x x x x	x x x x x x	x x x
Learning across language boundaries	x x x	x x x x x x x	x x x x x x x x
Becoming an independent learner		x x x x	x x x x x x x x x x x x x

Table 9.1: Chinese students' perceptions of own transformations<sup>17</sup>

Table 9.1 shows that the majority of these students felt that they had moved away from Chinese culture oriented positions (learning across language boundaries and becoming an independent learner) to UK culture oriented ones. Half of the students found themselves in Chinese culture oriented communities of learning while few perceived themselves as having formed UK culture oriented communities of learning. Students in the middle column of the table represent the ones in the space between two learning cultures.

Lo Bianco *et al.* (1999) suggests a helpful notion of the 'third place' where learning interactions between different socio-cultural backgrounds occur and develop successfully. It is the place where relevant parties can negotiate common understandings and practices to mutual benefit. In this thesis, I argue that Chinese students' learning experiences in the UK involves developing a 'third place' between Chinese culture oriented contexts and the UK culture oriented contexts, between self and other.

As discussed in Chapter 6 – communities of learning – the Chinese students' learning experience was shaped by their relationships with other people. These relationships form communities of learning. There were three kinds of relationships that emerged from the data. They are the given relationship with family in China, the chosen relationship with other students and the mediated relationship with tutors and work colleagues. The most important

<sup>17</sup> In Table 9.1, each 'X' represents the perceived positioning of one student



relationship for these students is the given relationship with their family. Parents' influences on Chinese student participants' education were apparent in this study. Most of the student participants are the only child in the family due to China's one-child policy. Their parents had high hopes for these students and intended to pay a lot of attention to their education. These students believed that their parents and extended families had encouraged and driven them to excel in their study from their early school years in China. Their close relationship with the family also gives students a sense of responsibility to succeed in their overseas study in the UK.

On their arrival in the UK, they immediately faced many challenges in their studies – for instance, the challenges with the English language and getting help in their daily life. In order to cope with these challenges, they tended to create a relationship-based community of learning with other Chinese students, mainly because they shared the similar culture, language and situation of studying overseas alone. This relationship with other Chinese students provided them with a sense of belonging and security. The bond they developed with other Chinese students was widely recognised to be a very important source of support for their study and life in general.

Meanwhile, in order to learn more about British culture, these Chinese students tried to develop a close relationship with UK students. However, it proved to be a very difficult task for these students due to language and cultural differences. Instead, they developed an even closer relationship with other Chinese students and other international students. They formed communities of learning based on these relationships. They found the support and strength in these communities for their study and social life. This study shows that Chinese students do not have to form a close bond with UK students to be successful in their overseas studies in terms of getting good marks.

Another significant relationship is the mediated relationship with tutors and colleagues in the work place – 'mediated' because neither wholly 'given' nor entirely 'chosen'. Under the influence of Confucian teachings, Chinese students tend to respect their tutors highly and expect their tutors to show kindness to them. In their prior learning experience in China, they had a close relationship with their tutors in the school and university. However, they found it very difficult to get to know their tutors in the UK, let alone to form a friendship with them. The participants reported the relationship they

had with their UK tutors was kept very professional: tutors provided help only on academic issues; and they had no contact with their tutors outside of the classroom and surgery hours.

Many participants in this study had part-time jobs during their study in the UK. Some of them needed a paid part time job to support their study financially while others took paid or voluntary jobs as an opportunity to practise English and comprehend the British culture. The relationships they developed with the colleagues were regarded as very important for their learning experience in the UK as a whole. Good personal relationships with working colleagues often provide Chinese students with an opportunity to appreciate the characters of the UK and learn British culture. For those who were planning to work in the UK after their study, it was important for them to learn how to handle working relationships with colleagues of different cultures.

Chapter 7 – learning across language boundaries – showed that Chinese undergraduate students face a number of major challenges when studying in a second language. These are: (a) their previous English language education could not sufficiently meet the language demands required in the UK; (b) participants found it challenging to adapt to the learning, teaching and assessment methods in the UK; and (c) academic writing was perceived as the most demanding part in their academic life in the UK. In order to cope with these challenges, Chinese students often seek help from the relationship-based communities of learning, in particular the community of learning with other Chinese students on the campus.

One of the main aims of western teaching in higher education is to help students become independent learners. An independent learner is one who, in conjunction with others, can make the decisions necessary to meeting her or his own learning needs. Independent learners are capable, self-reliant, self-motivated and life-long learners.

Chapter 8 – becoming an independent learner – suggests that while these Chinese students faced great challenges in coping with a new socio-cultural and different institutional learning setting, they had managed to see themselves as independent learners. Their independent learning was formed by their motivations to learn and capabilities developed during their study in the UK. A formula of independent learning for these Chinese students can be expressed as 'M (Motivation) + C (Capabilities) = I (Independent Learning)'. Chinese

students in this study value learning as an empowering activity of great personal and social worth. Their motivation for studying in the UK was deeply rooted in the combination of the intrinsic value of education in Chinese tradition, self-fulfilment and personal enjoyment, and the extrinsic needs of personal growth in contemporary China. The capabilities they developed are not a set of transferable skills but one's freedom to be and do. Three major capabilities emerged from the data – being able to make informed decisions, self- and intercultural awareness, and a sense of futurity. The combination of their motivation and capabilities has facilitated their independent learning. As a result, they have become more confident to cope with the future they have chosen.

The findings of this study are relevant for other groups of international students in the UK. Culture-conditioned issues, like the influence of Confucius traditions on students' perceptions of purpose of learning and on students' learning styles, are exclusive to Chinese students and other East Asian students, but other issues related to challenges adjusting to a new learning and teaching environment may be common to other group of international students. For instance, Indian students have cultural pedagogical traditions such as 'guru' teaching that differ from those that are predominant in the UK. Hence, the findings of the research may provide an insight into learning experiences of other international students in the UK, and the implications identified may help improve support provision for other international students. The findings might be of great help to other groups of international students in the process of adjusting to the learning environment. Three major aspects identified below might be taken into account in their adaptation to the UK learning setting - being receptive to new learning and teaching styles, using one's prior learning, and using friendship patterns to help learning. In order to be able to thrive in the new learning context it is essential to have an awareness of what is expected for academic study in the UK, to harness skills gained in the past for study in the new environment and develop new skills, and develop relationships with others to form learning communities. It is again to develop the 'third place' as a zone for mediating the learning and cultural differences.

International students studying in the UK face learning and teaching styles different from those of their home country. It is advisable that international students be open to the new learning and teaching styles before they can start to adjust to the new conditions. Being receptive to new learning and teaching approaches is a prerequisite for the development of appropriate learning strategies and learning styles to cope with the new academic

environment. Before coming to the UK, students should research the UK academic conventions and cultures, teaching and learning styles, and assessment methods to have a global idea of what the UK learning environment is like. Studying the pre-arrival information carefully would to a great extent help international students manage the challenges ahead and alleviate anxiety. ‘Come prepared, and note down the concerns’ one of the participants commented in the interview, ‘then seek help accordingly upon arrival’. As mentioned above, induction to the UK learning and teaching styles and study skills training provided by institutions would be beneficial for international students in their process of adapting to the new learning environment. International students are encouraged to take advantage of these learning opportunities and make full use of support provisions available to them.

To be able to develop new skills for new learning environments, it is important to recognise that everybody has skills and qualities which they can adapt to study in the UK HE and be self-aware of current skills possessed and of current strengths and weaknesses (Cottrell, 1999). International students have tremendous experience from the past, and study skills gained in their previous education, which might be harnessed for the learning in the new academic environment to explore those experiences and reflect on, and identify what skills can be adopted in the new learning situation, including communication skills, working with others, problem-solving skills and so forth. Not only might the study skills gained in the previous education be modified and used in a new context, international students might find it valuable to revisit their prior learning experience or a particular learning situation in which solutions were found to deal with certain problems. Methods used to find solutions to problems in the past might be adapted in the new situation and to facilitate the development of new strategies. Moreover, personal qualities and characteristics developed in the past might be found valuable in the new context. Making a list of personal qualities, mapping and profiling the personal qualities to see how they can be used and further developed in new learning settings might be a useful strategy.

International students are encouraged to form a learning community during their study in the UK by developing relationships with their peers (including compatriot, indigenous students, and students of other nationals), academic and support tutors, and people from local communities. Being associated with a learning community would provide international students with opportunities to meet people with shared interests, values and beliefs, and actively engage in learning together. International students tend to have close relations with

students from their home country and other groups of international students since they share same culture and traditions with their compatriot, and face similar difficulties of studying overseas as their compatriot and other groups of international students. Relations with them would be of help and encouragement in coping with problems in academic and daily life. Relationships with indigenous students would maximize the opportunity for international students to understand the UK culture, and to improve their English language. International students are encouraged to participate in student societies and clubs where they can meet and make friends with local students. International students should also take the initiative in working with local students on group projects, by which they can learn from local students, develop new skills academically and become more confident linguistically and culturally. Again, this could be seen as a valuable ‘third place’ of inter-cultural learning.

Relationships with academic tutors are extremely important for a positive learning experience. Academic tutors are able to provide students with constructive advice and guidance with their academic studies. International students tend to have high expectations of tutors and anticipate a closer personal contact with their tutors than they have received in the UK system (Channell, 1990). To avoid disappointment, therefore, international students should communicate with their tutors regarding the expectations they should have of one another. International students should be aware that other members of support staff are available on the campus. Once again, emphasis is placed on the awareness of institutional and departmental support provisions, and making full use of these support offered.

Relations with people of local community can be of value for international students. The relations with local people can be formed by taking part in local voluntary schemes, or having a part-time job. Not only do the relationships developed with colleagues in the workplace help international students to learn local culture and customs, the relationships also help them develop interpersonal, communicative and other transferable skills, which would benefit them in the long term.

### **Implications and recommendations for HEIs**

In this section, I outline the implications of the study for HEIs and professional practice. In this thesis, I have tried to understand the experience of studying abroad in terms of what I call ‘learning journeys’. Learning involves building on prior knowledge, skills and beliefs, which

are synthesised with new experiences in order to construct new knowledge, skills and beliefs. Social interaction is integral to this process of construction. HEIs can play a vital role in facilitating this interaction with a view to enabling Chinese students to acquire a deeper understanding of UK culture and of higher education practices. The conceptual underpinning for the following discussion of the implications and recommendations is shown in Figure 9.2.

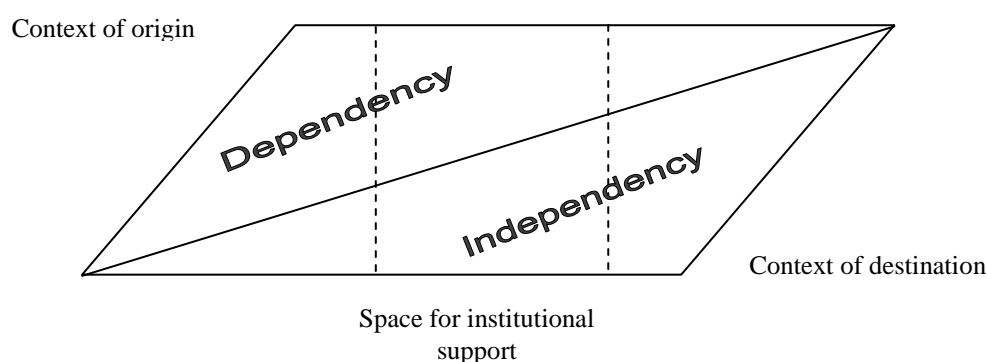


Figure 9.2: Conceptual justification for recommendations

Chinese students come from a context of origin where learning is associated with dependency, while their context of destination in the UK emphasises independent learning. In order to help transform these Chinese students' learning, there is the need for a space in between – a space of learning. This involves developing a 'third place' between the context of origin and context of destination and between the international students and HEIs. In order to develop this 'third place', each party should value and appreciate each other's learning context. This 'third place' is where students' experiences of learning are formed and developed and where HEIs need to provide student support.

Based on the theoretical framework and the findings of this study, a number of implications are identified in relation to organisational structures and professional practices. The implications for UK HEIs are profound in providing quality support to international students.

The findings of the study suggest the need for language support, academic and pedagogical support, and student support at the institutional level. Most UK HEIs have the basic range of support in place. However, it is worth questioning whether the support provision currently available has met the specific needs of Chinese students. The second set of implications,

related to professional practices, covers greater awareness of the needs of Chinese students and of their different learning styles.

### ***Institutional support***

With reference to the broad category of ‘institutional support’, students raised issues regarding language support, academic and pedagogical support, and student support.

### ***Language support***

English language proficiency is most frequently cited in the literature as one of the major problems affecting international students’ learning experiences in English-speaking countries (e.g. Campbell and Li, 2007; Elsey, 1990; Hills & Thom, 2005; Robertson *et al.*, 2000). The participants of this study also identified English language problems as a constant barrier to their learning in the UK. It was reported as causing difficulties in communication, comprehension, and academic writing. It is also worth mentioning that universities should be aware that students with required IELTS scores do not necessarily have the level of English language proficiency to meet the academic demands of courses as the literature (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1995; Durkin, 2004; and Edwards & Ran, 2006) demonstrates. The findings of this study suggest that opportunities to improve students’ English language skills should be provided by universities. Unfortunately, it was not the case at the University where the study took place. The provision of language support – both pre-sessional and in-sessional English language courses – should be in place on campus. Pre-sessional English language courses can provide students with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with English usage in academic settings, to polish their English communication and writing skills, and to develop their awareness of the UK academic culture and conventions. The pre-sessional English language courses may cover an introduction to academic English, academic writing, and general study skills required by the UK HE, like listening and notes-taking in lectures, interpreting, reading, presentation delivering, and seminar-speaking skills, may also be incorporated into the pre-sessional courses.

The language support should not stop once the student’s academic studies commence, and there should be incessant language support during the course of their degree studies. In-sessional English language support, integral to students’ academic studies, might be offered,

including English language courses, workshops and tutorials. Instead of providing general academic support as pre-sessional English language courses are designed for, in-sessional English language support should be subject-specific, which requires close collaboration between language support tutors and academic faculties. Each academic department within the faculty might offer discipline-specific language support, which is of relevance to students who pursue a particular programme of study, for instance in the Science and Social Sciences faculty, language support provision might be categorised into psychology, health and applied social science, geography and social work. With the built-in language support provision, a tailored support will be made possible, including introduction of discipline language and subject-specific discourse, and academic culture and expectations of a particular discipline. These aspects were highlighted by the participants of this study as areas in which they were less confident.

For international Chinese students, the essence of language support is to develop their confidence in using English for academic purposes, more precisely for subject-specific purposes. As revealed from the findings, the Chinese students felt that they had a relatively solid foundation in terms of grammar rules, and general vocabulary, but felt less confident in using academic English in their subject areas. The students would undoubtedly benefit from targeted subject-specific language support. The participants also expressed their lack of competence in the communicative use of English language, especially in academic settings such as group discussions, seminars and tutorial discussions where a good command of English communication skills is required. Specific support would be of valuable assistance in terms of getting students involved in the discussion and therefore helping them to develop the independent learning skills that are part of the learning experience in the UK. Such support may include techniques on how to pose and respond to a question, on how to initiate and maintain a conversation, and on how to introduce and respond to ideas and opinions. Other important issues highlighted by the participants relate to the difficulties caused in communication and comprehension by their unfamiliarity with colloquial language and the UK culture. Hence, an introduction to common vernacular, and the UK culture might be incorporated into the language support programmes.



### *Academic and pedagogical support*

The findings of this study show that Chinese students come from a learning environment considerably different from that of the UK. Some Chinese students who enrolled on the undergraduate courses are secondary school graduates, so they have no experiences of higher education in China let alone of UK HEIs. If the transition to the higher education is difficult for indigenous students, it is even more demanding for international Chinese students since not only do they need to learn to adapt to the new learning environment but do so in a second language setting. In conjunction with language difficulties, Chinese students are facing unfamiliar academic rules and conventions, and pedagogical approaches of the UK HEIs. Moreover, often these rules vary from discipline to discipline. Also pedagogical methods are culturally conditioned and are shaped by the cultural norms of a society (Barrow, 1990; Kelen, 2002). China and the UK embrace different cultural values and traditions, consequently, Chinese students who are accustomed to the pedagogical approach of their own culture would find it an enormous challenge in adapting to the British pedagogy. It is of paramount importance that the UK HEIs to take into account the cultural issues in their academic support provision for international Chinese students.

Structured academic support is required to help students understand and familiarize themselves with academic conventions of the UK HE system. In other word, it is to establish a 'third place' for international students. The design of academic support might share the same rationale as for providing language support provision as mentioned above. That is a combination of pre-sessional and in-sessional academic support programmes. Pre-sessional academic support programmes might be scheduled during the induction / orientation period, in which students are offered opportunities to have a general overview of the UK HE academic culture and expectations of the individual university for their students. The introduction to academic support services available to international students should be featured in these programmes. In-sessional academic support programmes might be delivered by individual faculty or at departmental level depending on the numbers of international students in each department, and run during the course of their studies. Academic skills required by their study should be introduced with a greater attention to detail covering lecture skills, seminar skills, assessment skills, research skills and how to use the library and on-line resources. Regular drop-in workshops and tutorials might be offered for exchange of study skills, and for question and answer time. These academic study skills courses might be run

either in parallel with or incorporated into language support courses, which requires departmental involvement, and close collaboration between academic departments and language support units.

Academic writing was identified by the participants of the research as the most challenging aspect of their academic study in the UK. The participants were generally aware of the writing support services at the university. Some participants found it useful while others voiced their dissatisfaction. The most salient concern is writing tutors' lack of subject knowledge, and therefore they are not able to provide subject-specific support, which is in great demand among Chinese students. It might be a good practice that subject tutors have greater involvement into the academic writing support at university level, and regular writing workshops or tutorials can be run at departmental level and organized by subject tutors, during which subject-specific questions related to writing can be raised and answered, and subject-specific writing rules and individual tutor's expectations can be clarified. The structured academic writing courses, covering general introduction to types of academic writing, academic writing skills and strategies, and references requirement, might be beneficial to students who are unfamiliar with or had minimal trainings on the UK academic writing. The participants also voiced the worry that they have a shortage of time to seek writing support. So the department might need to take measures to encourage the access to the support, for instance by designing the writing courses as add-on credited courses or integrated with students' degree studies.

As mentioned in the context chapter, the development of globalisation has seen the tendency toward the internationalisation of higher education. It is imperative for the UK HEIs to develop strategies and policies infused with international dimensions. One of the efforts toward the internationalisation of higher education is the internationalisation of curricula. There are many approaches to the internationalisation of curricula. Based on the findings of this study, two approaches are considered of most relevance – developing the curriculum with an international orientation in outcomes, assessment, content, learning activities and resources (Leask, 2005) and developing a cultural synergy (Kingston & Forland, 2008). The participants highlighted the cultural disorientation they encountered in case studies and examples designed by their tutors in humanities subjects. The students complained about the prevalence of UK culture in the course content and no reference to cultural examples from

their place of origin. They appreciated acquiring the knowledge of UK culture, but would like to see the inclusion of cultural examples they are familiar with and can relate to.

Moreover, there is urgency for the UK HEIs to develop cultural literacy to become more inter-culturally responsive (Kingston & Forland, 2008; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003). Currently pedagogical approaches and assessment methods of the UK HEIs are designed with the dominant cultural values, which would cause learning dislocation and isolation of students who are from different cultural backgrounds. The development of cultural synergy requires the appreciation of and integration into pedagogy of international students' experiences and their cultural values. The notion of the 'third place' is relevant to students' mediation of a meeting place between two differing academic cultures. This has implications for academic staff development to help international students. Intercultural training programmes may be offered for academic staff to develop the understanding of cultural values and ideologies of their international students, which would facilitate the awareness and appreciation of their students' learning and teaching preferences. At the institutional level, inclusive learning, teaching and assessment strategies embedding intercultural perspectives might be formed to enable the development of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values for academic staff (Caruana & Hanstock, 2003). Likewise, intercultural training programmes for international students would help increase their understanding of the UK cultural norms.

### *Student support*

Student support is an integral part of university provisions to its students. Kinnell (1990) points out that the special needs of international students should be recognized notwithstanding the claim that all students, irrespective whether home or international students, were in need of support services, that there were essentially no difference between the needs of international students and home students, and that the existing support facilities should be able to meet the needs of international students. Therefore, special support provision should be duly provided to ensure a quality service for international students and that they have a positive experience in the UK. Support provision should start in their home country. Pre-departure information and guidance would help them prepare for the arrival and life in the UK. The orientation and induction programmes, designed specifically for international students, are essential to familiarize students with the academic and social community of the university, and support provision available at the university. Ongoing

support should be offered during the course of their stay at the university in terms of assistance on accommodation, finance, immigration, health, part-time work and other personal issues. Moreover the university should work closely with other national agencies like the British Council, UKCISA, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) to ensure the awareness of policy changes affecting international students and the sharing of the knowledge and resources for improvements of support provision for international students. Staff training programmes on awareness of needs of overseas students should be open to staff at all levels including academic, administrative, technical and domestic staff. In the proposed 'third place', it is a two-way process. UK HEIs need to explore and understand the challenges facing the international students and find ways to mediate them in a mutually supportive manner.

The minimal social interaction between international students and local students was a recurring theme in the literature on East Asian and Chinese students' experiences in the western universities (e.g. Campbell & Li, 2008; Li & Kaye, 1998; Symons *et al.*, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). The low level of social interaction between Chinese students and home students was highlighted by the participants in the interviews and autobiographical accounts as one of the pressing issues affecting their learning experience. While acknowledging the importance of social interaction in their adaptation to the new learning and cultural environment, the participants of this study expressed the difficulties they encountered in making friends with indigenous students, and the disappointment they felt towards not being able to establish quality relationships with local students. A number of factors, identified in the study, have attributed to the failure of effective interaction with indigenous students: different cultural backgrounds, language problems, academic pressure, lack of opportunities, and perceived local students' indifference.

Given the importance of social interaction to the students' academic, cultural and social adjustment, the UK HEIs should not ignore this issue. Also, a dissatisfied student is not likely to recommend his or her experience to others in their home country (Kinnell, 1990), which would have a detrimental impact on universities' recruitment of overseas students in the long run. Hence, it is imperative for the UK HEIs to investigate ways of promoting and taking steps to facilitate effective interaction between Chinese students and local students, and the wider society. The university has a responsibility to promote intercultural understanding and appreciation among its students and staff, to foster an atmosphere in which overseas students

are felt being genuinely accepted and understood. The awareness of others' culture – fostered through both formal and informal learning experiences in the HE setting – would encourage local students to be open to international students, which would facilitate social interaction. Improving international students' daily communicative skills should be highlighted in the language support provision. Regular social activities or programmes might be organized at university level or departmental level to maximize international students' opportunities to form a relationship with local students.

The social contact with home students and wider society might be channelled by the career services through introducing part-time job and voluntary work opportunities on campus or in the local community to the international students. The majority of the participants of the research worked in a Chinese restaurant, and they were concerned that this was not compatible with what they envisaged before coming to the UK. They would prefer jobs that would facilitate the development of skills, acquisition of work experience and building of social networks. One participant reported the benefits she gained in working at a local charity shop. The voluntary work might provide the international students with opportunities to meet local people and embark on a cultural discovery. The participants also expressed a preference for having a one-to-one student buddy, a home student who is paired with an international student during the course of their studies, to help improve mutual cultural awareness, and discuss learning experiences, and build social networks.

### ***Departmental ethos***

The departmental support is of importance as an integral part of the overall support provision offered by the university. Individual departments are best positioned to offer international students discipline- and subject-specific support since the academic life of international students at university mainly takes place at departmental level. Sufficient support provision would contribute to the overall quality of university support provision for international students, to a great extent leading to more effective learning by international students.

In conjunction with institution-wide generic support, it is suggested that individual departments provide tailored and subject-specific provision for international students. The findings of the research show that there is an anticipation of availability of subject-specific support at departmental level among Chinese international students. The participants of the

research said that they would have benefited from subject-specific support related to academic writing, academic conventions, study skills and assessment procedures. Different subjects have their own different terminology and vocabulary. Academic writing is subject-specific, consisting of various types of writing, each with particular requirements. Assessment tasks vary across subject areas; for instance, examinations of different subject might require students to write short texts to answer questions, or to answer multiple choice questions. It became more challenging when the participants were studying combined subjects. Some participants expressed their confusion and disorientation with regard to distinct academic discourse, requirements and expectations of their two different subjects. Subject-specific support provision at departmental level, available prior to the commencement of the course and throughout the course of their study, would help facilitate their learning by familiarizing them with, and making explicit academic requirements and expectations of, a particular subject. The support might take the forms of intensive pre-sessional and on-going training courses, regular workshops and tutorials. The participants also mentioned their lack of time to seek help and attend workshops. It would help promote the attendance if the training sessions or intensive pre-sessional course be integrated into the curriculum.

Department should provide their academic staff with training on how to work with international students. The training would help increase academic staff awareness of specific needs of international students and provide practical solutions to responding effectively to these needs in their teaching. Academic staff might be in need of assistance on the development of teaching strategies and approaches to address the needs of international students. Arkoudis (2006) has identified six major strategies that can be adopted for use in the teaching, including internationalising the curriculum, making lectures accessible, encouraging participation in small group work, adopting an educative approach to plagiarism, supporting students in developing critical thinking skills, and explaining assessment expectations. These six areas of strategies can be modified, and further developed in the staff training programme. Moreover, a dedicated international coordinator in each department might be appointed as the first point of contact for international students regarding problems in their studies and daily life. The departmental coordinator is expected to have a whole picture of the subjects taught in the department, a better understanding of departmental policies and procedures concerning international students, and knowledge of university and departmental support provisions for international students. Through liaising with university

support services and departmental academic staff, the coordinator would be able to offer international students subject-specific advice, or refer them to relevant support services or academic staff where appropriate.

The academic department should encourage international students' participation in and engagement with the academic community. Active participation in the academic community would help increase their knowledge of subject areas and the academic culture of a particular discipline, develop their communicative and interpersonal skills, and improve their English language proficiency and enhance their learning experiences. The international students might be encouraged to attend institutional or departmental public lectures, seminars or tutorials. Student study forums and blogs might be set up to provide international students with a space for discussion of issues related to their study, and seeking subject-related help and support from academic staff and fellow students. The department might like to produce an international student newsletter, communicating events and activities within the department that international students might find interesting and useful to their learning. For instance, international students might be encouraged to partake in essay competitions organised by the department or external organizations to help foster their sense of achievement, and develop their academic confidence. The participants of the research mentioned in the interview that they would welcome the appointment of an international student representative in the department, and his/her presence in the departmental level committee meetings. On behalf of all the international students in the department, the student representative would be able to raise issues related to their courses, be consulted regarding policy and practices related to international students, and be informed of the latest departmental news, policy changes and support provision.

The effective implementation of strategies and approaches at departmental level to ensure adequate support provision and to address specific needs of international students cannot be achieved without the full backing of the university in relation to leadership and provision of resources. The university might like to review their strategic plan and incorporate international dimensions into policy making, aiming to create a university community responsive to the needs of international students at departmental level.

### ***Professional practice***

Under the broad category of ‘professional practice’, students raised issues relating to the awareness of the needs of Chinese students and of different learning and teaching styles.

#### *Awareness of needs of Chinese students*

Academics play an important role in international Chinese students’ academic experiences in the UK. It is increasingly recognised that to ensure they have a positive learning experience academic teaching staff are expected to understand specific needs of Chinese students and act accordingly to cater for their needs. If it is beyond the responsibilities of academic staff, sometimes simply being sensitive to their needs can be of great help and assurance. Chinese students’ needs considered in this section are culturally conditioned, which demands a general awareness of cultural background in which Chinese students come from. Staff training on Chinese cultural traditions and values, and their impact on students’ preferred learning and teaching styles would scaffold academic staff in understanding and addressing the needs of Chinese students.

Chinese students have a compelling need to achieve academic success, and they are under huge pressure to excel in their academic studies. In the light of Chinese tradition, academic success is perceived as an important means towards upward social mobility. Very often Chinese students regard high academic achievement as the passport towards a decent job, especially a qualification from the UK HEIs, which would help them stand out and give them the edge in the competitive job market. In addition, as (often) the only child of their family, Chinese students aspire to meet the expectations of family and to show appreciation towards their parents. Chinese tradition values the unity of family, and a child’s filial duty to their parents. Chinese students have a moral responsibility to requite their parents’ devotion towards them and to support them when they are old, considering the financial support they received from their parents and possible sacrifices their parents made to provide them with opportunities to study overseas. Professional academics need to be aware of the pressure that Chinese students are under to succeed academically and the cultural attributes behind it, and be sympathetic towards the difficulties they encounter by providing them with extra



assistance to facilitate the achievement of their educational and career goals. This is a process of helping Chinese students to find a ‘third place’ in their overseas study.

Chinese and Asian tradition tends to attribute academic success to effort, as opposed to ability in Western culture (Hess & Azuma, 1991; Li, 2001; Kim & Chun, 1994; Stevenson *et al.*, 2000). The emphasis on effort for educational success is associated with such personal qualities as being diligent, industrious, hard-working and determined. To many, intelligence is not something innate and relatively fixed, but can be improved by hard work (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Some participants in this study attributed their poor performance in examination or lower marks in academic essays to the lack of effort, and claimed that they should have worked much harder and spent more time on revising the knowledge and completing the assignment. Chinese students believe that they would be more likely to succeed academically if they made an effort and worked hard, which not take into account other factors that might contribute to academic achievement. These factors might include one’s prior learning experience, language proficiency, and one’s ability to adapt to a new learning setting. Being aware of Chinese students’ belief in effort and diligence, academic staff would be able to facilitate students’ successful academic attainment by communicating to the students the influence of these other factors in academic success, and encouraging the development of new learning skills.

The participants expected closer relationships with their academic tutors than they actually experienced. The participants expressed a desire for a greater level of personal contact with their tutors, a finding that is consistent with Channell (1990)’s study of the student and tutor relationship at two UK universities. Chinese students expect having not only professional and formal relationships, but also personal and informal relations with their academic tutors. This expectation has its cultural origins – teachers in Chinese tradition are portrayed not only as authoritarian figures being strict and rigid, but also as caring and considerate mentors and moral educators (Ho, 2001). They are expected to be devoted to not just the teaching of academic knowledge but their students’ overall development and cultivation (On, 1996). Chinese students expect they can turn to their tutors for advice on problems they encounter not only in their learning but also daily life. However this personal relationship with and greater personal attention from their academic tutors anticipated by Chinese students would contradict the general practice in the UK HEIs which promotes the professional relations between student and tutors, and would exert extra pressure on academic staff. To overcome

this problem and reduce the gap between expectations and actualities, academic staff might want to make their roles and responsibilities explicit to Chinese students; to avoid disappointment and ensure positive experiences for the students, academic staff should have a clear knowledge of support provision available at the institutional or departmental level, and be ready to refer students to other support services. It is advisable that academic staff set limits to the extent of their involvement and make referrals once they feel the further involvement would be beyond their management (Ho, 2001).

### *Awareness of different learning and teaching styles*

Having considered some major needs of Chinese students and how appropriate practices can be developed to address these needs, developing awareness of Chinese education styles and students' learning styles is discussed in this section. As with the needs of Chinese students, many issues related to Chinese students' learning and teaching styles are culturally conditioned, so to facilitate the understanding of their way of learning, and development of culturally sensitive pedagogy, staff training on Chinese cultural values and traditions is necessary. There is a need for professional academics to 'recognise the limitations of their own culturally conditioned responses and to engage with students from [other] cultural background, to negotiate meanings and classroom norms which make learning accessible to all' (Fischer, 2008, p.17).

The challenge of classroom interaction was one of the major issues emerging from the data analysis. The participants said that they tended to shy away from participating in seminar and tutorial discussions. Recognising language problems as one affecting factor, the participants stressed the influence of their prior learning experiences. In China lecturers dominate classroom activities with minimal questioning or discussions by students (Chan, 1999); in contrast, the UK HE promotes active classroom interaction. In Chinese classroom the teacher-centred approach predominates, and students are mainly taught in a didactic way, unlike in the UK where a more student-centred classroom atmosphere prevails with the intention of encouraging independent learning. The participants pointed out they were accustomed to the learning setting where teachers do the talking and students listening. From the cultural perspective, the Chinese tradition respects the hierarchical relations in the formal class situation (Ho, 2001), in which teachers are the authority and students are seldom encouraged to question and challenge teachers.

Having said all this, academics need to be aware of the classroom dynamics which Chinese students are familiar with and their cultural roots. The appropriate actions might therefore be taken to encourage active participation in the discussion. The need is for clarification on the expectations of the UK pedagogies in terms of requiring students to question and critique. Organising small group or one-to-one discussion in tutorials and seminars, the practice Chinese students would find more comfortable. An informal setting would maximise the chances to stimulate discussion since collective activities including teacher-student and student-student interactions tend to become active outside the classroom (Biggs, 1996; Ho, 2001). Academic staff might be able to develop Chinese students' confidence in talking or put them in a comfortable zone by initiating the conversation. As mentioned above it is necessary to provide Chinese students with study skills training programmes during which discussion techniques, such as how to initiate and maintain a conversation, pose and respond to questions, and how to introduce and respond to ideas and opinions, might be introduced and practised.

Chinese students are frequently stereotyped by Western educators as rote learners, adopting a surface approach to learning. Such a misconception is formed by a misunderstanding of learning strategies Chinese students use and considering China's examination-oriented education system. Chinese students often memorise textbooks to ensure accurate recall of information to cope with examinations. Nevertheless, memorization must be distinguished from mere rote learning. Chinese education recognizes that memorisation can lead to understanding of the knowledge. A distinction between the intentions of memorizing and rote learning is of great help to understand the differences between them. If memorizing is used as a means of coming to understand, then it becomes a deep strategy (Biggs, 1996). Some research shows that memorising and understanding are intertwined and a combined use of memorising and understanding led to good performance academically (Kember, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1996). It is important for academic staff to be aware of the different learning practices, therefore to avoid misconception and repudiation of Chinese students' learning methods.

Assessment is an integral part of the student's academic studies. There are marked differences between assessment methods in China and in the UK. As revealed in the findings, written examinations characterise assessment in China; in contrast, assessment consists of

examinations, presentations, group project and academic writing in the UK. Chinese students, accustomed to taking examinations, would find it difficult to cope with other types of assessment, especially during the transitional period. The participants of the research felt overwhelmed by various forms of assessment, and the workload required. It is necessary to familiarise the students with UK assessment by providing a general induction at the outset to the assessment methods required by their discipline and study skills required for assessment. This induction might be covered in the study skills training programmes in academic support mentioned above. With a global idea of what they will face in assessment, the students will feel less intimidated and have a solid basis.

The point to be made probably applies to all students, but is imperative to Chinese students. As has been reiterated throughout the chapters, Chinese students come from an educational setting where learning is conducted in a didactic and teacher-led manner. There is a need for explicit instruction and clarification on what is expected from the students in terms of assessment objectives, requirements and marking criteria, and appropriate scaffolding in completing the assignments. ‘Sensitive scaffolding’ in the form of consultation and explicit instructions by teachers is seen as ways of supporting international students’ acquisition of unfamiliar practices (Gee, 1996; Ridley, 2004). With respect to academic writing, tutors need to make explicit to students the expected writing conventions, referencing systems, and issue of plagiarism. The provision of a reading list relevant to writing tasks would be helpful. Time might be arranged for teacher and student dialogue - to provide the student with opportunities to consult with tutors in groups or as individuals about unpacking the assignment titles, reading, structuring, argument and language of the writing (Ridley, 2004). Since Chinese students find it difficult to interact with indigenous students, the completion of group work together could help facilitate the interaction. Academic staff might want to take the initiative to encourage Chinese students to work with local students on group projects, through which mutual understanding might be formed and future interaction induced.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored how a group of Chinese undergraduate students have transformed themselves within a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning settings at an English university. Their learning experiences have been contextualised in a theoretical framework. The rich autobiographical accounts and interview data have provided

students' voices which are not often heard in the review of institutional provision. Their voices were represented in this thesis with author's clear positionality. I am part of what I am writing about and I did not allow self-indulgence.

The strength of this study lies in its focus on the support needs of overseas students as defined and understood by the students themselves. The findings of this study have implications for UK HEIs and relevance to other groups of international students. (Indeed, the research reported in this thesis could be developed through a follow-up study of how universities and other agencies respond to the suggestions contained in this final chapter.) I hope that this study might help create a 'third place' for international students and indigenous communities to meet to achieve mutual recognition of their cultural and linguistic differences and to use that recognition in the interests of mutual support and understanding. In this way, the educational experience can, for all parties, be richer and more fulfilling.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Research project information sheet

#### **Title of research project:**

*Transformations through learning: the experience of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in an English university*

#### **Name(s) of research team and institutional affiliation:**

*Researcher: Feng Su, The University of Liverpool*

*Supervisors: Prof. Jon Nixon, Prof. Bob Adamson and Prof. Bart McGettrick*

The above research project is carried out for the purpose of a doctorate degree in the University of Liverpool. The research project aims to explore what academic learning challenges Chinese undergraduate students face at a UK university; how they respond to these challenges; and what institutional conditions need to be in place to mitigate the challenges Chinese students face.

If you decide to become involved in this project, you will be asked to write a 1000-word autobiography on your learning experience in both China and UK; to participate in a focus group, and two semi-structured interviews. The interviews will be tape recorded. These will take place in the location where you study and the time commitment will be in a range of 2 to 4 hours over four months period (March - August 2009).

The information you provide will eventually form part of research for dissemination and publication to the wider academic community. Therefore, this project will follow standard university ethical guidelines: sessions will be recorded but transcriptions will be anonymous. Data will be anonymised to protect your privacy and will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Participation in the study will have no detrimental impact on progression or professional development, but you have the right to withdraw from this project at any time and participation is not compulsory.

If you have any remaining questions regarding your role in this study please contact the leading researcher via the email [f.su@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:f.su@hotmail.co.uk). If you agree to participate, please sign the separate consent form.

Thank you very much for your participation in this research project.

(DATE: 4<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

## **Appendix 2: Consent form**

### **Title of research project:**

*Transformations through learning: the experience of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in an English university*

### **Name of lead researcher and institutional affiliation:**

*Feng Su, The University of Liverpool, tel 0151 291 3583 e-mail: f.su@hotmail.co.uk*

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 4<sup>th</sup> March 2009 for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Yes    No

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

Yes    No

3. I agree to take part in the above study.

Yes    No

### **Name of participant:**

Signature:


Date:

### **Signature of lead researcher:**

Date:

### Appendix 3: Research ethics clearance form

#### SECTION 1. YOUR DETAILS

Name:	Feng Su
Faculty:	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences The University of Liverpool
Degree for which this research is being conducted or staff position at Hope	PhD
Supervisor or Project Leader/Principal Researcher	Prof. Jon Nixon Prof. Bob Adamson (Hong Kong) Prof. Bart McGettrick
Period during which research will be conducted	July 2008 – May 2010
Any specific external professional codes of practice that pertain to the kind of research proposed	n.a.
Your Signature	

#### SECTION 2. DETAILS OF RESEARCH STUDY

Full title of the research study	Transformations through learning: the experience of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in an English university
Aims and objectives of the research study	To explore challenges faced by Chinese undergraduate students in a UK university
Brief outline of the research study in non-technical language (approx 300 words)	This PhD study explores what transformations do Chinese undergraduate students undergo within a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning settings?
Where will the study take place and in what setting?	The research takes place at Liverpool Hope University with 18 undergraduate international Chinese students from mainland China

#### SECTION 3. RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

How will the participants in the study be selected, approached and recruited?	Participants will be selected randomly and recruited by advertisement.
How many participants will be recruited and of what age group?	18 students between 21 to 24 years old will be recruited

#### SECTION 4. CONSENT

Is written consent to be obtained? Yes

Please use STANDARD CONSENT FORM (a sample is attached)

If no written consent is to be obtained EXPLAIN WHY

Have any special arrangements been made for participants for whom English is not a first language Yes

If **yes**, give details  
Communication will be in the participants' native Chinese language – Mandarin

Are the participants in one of the following vulnerable groups?

Children under 16 No

People with learning difficulties No

Other vulnerable groups e.g. mental illness, dementia No

If **yes**, give details i.e. What special arrangements have been made to deal with the issues of consent e.g. is parental or guardian agreement to be obtained, and if so in what form?

Every participant must be given a written information sheet giving details about the research, separate from the consent form.

## RESEARCH PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of research project:**

*Transformations through learning: the experience of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in an English university*

**Name(s) of research team and institutional affiliation:**

*Researcher: Feng Su, The University of Liverpool*

*Supervisors: Prof. Jon Nixon, Prof. Bob Adamson and Prof. Bart McGettrick*

The above research project is carried out for the purpose of a doctorate degree in the University of Liverpool. The research project aims to explore what academic learning challenges Chinese undergraduate students face at a UK university; how they respond to these challenges; and what institutional conditions need to be in place to mitigate the challenges Chinese students face.

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The information you provide will eventually form part of research for dissemination and publication to the wider academic community. Therefore, this project will follow standard university ethical guidelines: sessions will be recorded but transcriptions will be anonymous. Data will be anonymised to protect your privacy and will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Participation in the study will have no detrimental impact on progression or professional development, but you have the right to withdraw from this project at any time and participation is not compulsory.

If you have any remaining questions regarding your role in this study please contact the leading researcher via the email [f.su@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:f.su@hotmail.co.uk). If you agree to participate, please sign the separate consent form.

Thank you very much for your participation in this research project.

(DATE: 4<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

## SECTION 5. RISKS AND ETHICAL PROCEDURE

Are there any potential hazards to participants (physical and/or psychological)? No

If yes, give details and give the likelihood and details of precautions taken to meet them, and arrangements to deal with adverse events:

Is this study likely to cause discomfort or distress to participants? No

If yes, estimate the degree and likelihood of discomfort or distress entailed:

## SECTION 6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Will the study data be held on a computer? Yes

If yes, will the relevant Data Protection Regulations be observed? (e.g. will data be kept under secure conditions so that it will not be accessible, interpretable, and used by individuals outside the project?). Give details of the steps you will undertake to ensure data security:

All data collected will be kept on computer with encryption and password protection.

Have any additional steps been taken to safeguard confidentiality of personal records?

Yes

If yes, give details:

All participants' name will be anonymised and no personal details which can be used to identify individual participant.

c) Will the study include the use of any of the following?

Audio/video recording Yes

Observation of participants No

If yes to either, how are confidentiality and anonymity to be ensured? What arrangements have been made to obtain consent? Please state how audio/video recording will be destroyed/neutralised at the end of the study:  
Students will be briefed on the use of audio recording in the study, and their consent will be obtained in a signed form. At the end of the study, all audio recordings will be deleted and destroyed.

### Comments of Supervisor

If you are a Liverpool Hope Student (undergraduate or postgraduate), now pass this form to the person who will supervise your research and ask him/her to comment on any ethical considerations that this research may raise.

*Supervisors: When you have completed your comments in the box below, please return this form to the relevant Deanery Research Ethics Coordinator*

The student is fully aware of the ethical practices and procedures relating to interviews, focus groups and the anonymity and confidentiality requirements of data. Consent procedures and appropriate controls are in place to ensure that ethical requirements are not violated.

- Prof. Jon Nixon

### Comments of Project Leader

If this research forms a discrete part of a larger project that has a project leader, now pass this form to the person who is leading this the project and ask him/her to comment on any ethical considerations that this research may raise.

*Project Leaders: When you have completed your comments in the box below, please return this form to the relevant Deanery Research Ethics Coordinator.*

n.a.

### Comment of the relevant Deanery Research Ethics Coordinator

The student has thought carefully about the ethical issue relating to the study and has put in place the necessary procedures. I am assured the terms of the Research Ethics Policy are fully being adhered to. The necessary forms have been completed and cleared by the Dean of Education.



*Deanery Research Ethics Coordinators:* You must now consult with the Dean and, where appropriate, a subject specific advisor, and make a decision. Your options are either

1. To indicate that ethical clearance is not required (see §9.4 of the Research Ethics Policy) in which case you should inform the applicant and keep a record of this decision for annual report to the Research Ethics Sub-Committee
2. To grant ethical clearance (see §9.5 of the Research Ethics Policy) in which case you should inform the Chair of the Research Committee who will either confirm permission or require fully consideration. You should keep the applicant updated of the progress of this process.
3. To submit the application to the Research Ethics Sub-Committee for fuller consideration and inform the applicant that this is the decision that has been reached at this stage. The Chair of the Research Ethics Sub-Committee will inform the applicant of any further documentation that is required.

Please indicate which of these options is to be followed by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

Inform the applicant that ethical clearance is not required	
Grant ethical clearance	✓
Forward the application to the Chair of the Research Ethics Sub-Committee	

Research Ethics Coordinator's Signature:

*J. D. Nixon*

Chair of Faculty Research Committee's Signature:

*Barb McGettrick*

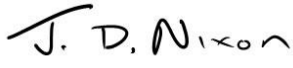

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> February 2009

#### Appendix 4: Ethical consideration declaration

All students conducting research projects or dissertation must sign this declaration to confirm that they have considered the ethics of conducting said piece of research.

It should then be countersigned by the module leader/ dissertation supervisor and logged with the Deanery Research Ethic Co-ordinator.

In some cases, students may be required to complete the Research Ethics Clearance Form for Research Ethics Sub-Committee approval of the project.

Student Name:	Feng Su
University ID Number:	200634088
Subject:	PhD in Education
Module code & Name:	n.a.
Faculty:	Faculty of Humanities and Social Science The University of Liverpool
Research project title:	Transformations through learning: the experience of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in an English university
Description of project: (please continue on separate sheet if required)	This PhD study explores what transformations do Chinese undergraduate students undergo within a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning settings?
I confirm that I have considered and understood the ethics of completing the above named research.	
Student Signature:	F.Su
Date:	3rd February 2009
Module Leader/ Supervisor Signature:	J. Nixon
Date:	10th February 2009
Deanery Research Ethics Co-ordinator and Chair of Deanery Research Committee Signatures:	 Prof. Jon Nixon  Prof. Bart McGettrick
Date:	10th February 2009

## Appendix 5: Instruction on writing a life story

As part of methodological approaches for the research ‘studying in a second language: academic learning challenges faced by Chinese students in UK higher education’, you are invited to write a 1000-word story on your learning experience in China and UK. You can write about anything which you wish to share with me. Alternatively, you can talk about:

- Where are you from in China? What is your home town like (location, size, population and economic development)?
- How many members are in your family? What do your parents do?
- What was your schooling like in China? Do you have a happy memory of your schooling in China? Why?
- When did you start to learn English language? Did you find it difficult to learn English in the beginning? Why?
- When did you start to consider studying overseas, and why?
- Why have you decided to study in the UK?
- How long have you been studying in the UK?
- What do you miss most about China?
- What subject do you study? Why do you choose this subject?
- How you been enjoying your study life here so far?
- What have you enjoyed most out of your study here?
- What challenges have you encountered in your study here? What are the differences between learning in China and UK?
- What is the most challenging issue in your study?
- How do you cope with these challenges which you mentioned above?
- Do you have any access to university’s support for international students (i.e. writing support, additional language support, mentoring and counselling)?
- What do you intend to do after your degree study here?
- How do you see yourself in the next 5 years?
- If you’re asked to measure the quality of your learning experience in a range of 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest while 10 is the highest score), what score will you give?
- Anything else you would like to share

Please note that the above questions are just for your consideration. You do not need answer all of the above questions. There are no right or wrong answers for the above questions. The researcher is not to judge your story. Instead, the researcher is to see your voice in the story and be excited, touched or surprised. What I am seeking is your story!

I will be very grateful if you could send me your story via email f.su@hotmail.co.uk by Friday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2009.

## **Appendix 6: Interview questions**

### **Some questions about yourself**

1. What have been major influences on your education so far?
2. What motivated you to study abroad?
3. What have been the main benefits of studying in the UK?
4. To what extent has studying in the UK changed your values and beliefs?

### **Learning challenges**

5. To what extent has English language proficiency been a challenge in your study in the UK? Can you give me some examples?
6. Have you found teaching and learning styles in the UK challenging? For instance, how are they different from Chinese learning styles in your previous education?
7. Do you have difficulties with writing for academic purposes? For instance, writing your assignments? If yes, what challenges do you face?
8. Have you found it difficult to work / communicate with others (for instance, the local students, other international students and tutors) in your study?
9. Do you have any other difficulties or challenges which you think have significantly affected your study in the UK (e.g. social life, finance, accommodation, part-time job, food, homesick & health)?

### **Coping strategies**

10. How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of English language?
11. How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of different teaching and learning styles?
12. How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of academic writing in English?
13. How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of learning in a group?
14. How do you cope with/manage/respond to the other challenges you mentioned earlier?

### **Institutional conditions**

15. What support do you receive from your peers (e.g. Chinese friends and classmates) and other social groups?
16. What support have you received from the university to tackle the above challenges (i.e. writing support, additional language support, mentoring and counselling)?
17. Do you think there is sufficient learning support available for you?
18. What further support would you like to receive from the university?

### **Other questions**

19. Have I missed any questions out? Or are there any other questions you want to add?
20. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

*Notes:*

1. Prompts for each question will be prepared in order to help interviewees develop their response;
2. Both English and Chinese language – Mandarin will be offered to interviewees at the beginning of the interview. The interviewee can choose either of these languages;
3. During the interviews, the above interview questions were asked in both English and Chinese in order to clarify the meaning of each question;
4. During the interviews, the researcher will check with interviewees on his initial understanding of their answers;
5. Each interview will last about 90 minutes.

## Appendix 7: A sample of interview transcription and translation

Interview date and time: 14.20 on 15th April 2009  
Interview duration: 80.00 minutes  
Interview language: Mandarin Chinese

Persons presented: Interviewer – Feng Su (FS)  
Narrator – Peter

### BEGIN OF TRANSCRIPT AND TRANSLATION

FS: *Thanks for coming to this interview. First, can we talk about the measure of learning experience graphs you draw?*

Peter: No problem and glad to participate in your research.

FS: *Let's start with the first graph. Please could you tell me how you decide the measure of your learning experience at a different age?*

Peter: My memory ability isn't that good and I only remember from age of eight. I started to go to school at that age. For the first two years in a primary school at my home town, I felt it was ok and happy to play with friends from the same place. So, I gave it a measurement of 7. However, two years later, when I was 10 years old, I transferred to an elite private primary school which was away from my home. At the first time to be away from the home, I found it difficult. So, I gave it a score of 6 for this dramatic change of my early school years.

As the time went on, it became fun to study away from home. In the next two years, I started to get know my classmates who were also first-timer of studying away from home. There were about 20 students in my class. I lived with another three boys. Once I overcame the initial uncomfortable feelings, I became to get on well with other students, and started to enjoy these two years. I think it's mainly because parents were not around you to tell you what you need to do. Also, all classmates were at a similar age. I found the subjects in the school very interesting. For example, I studied piano after the classes. My English name of Peter was given by an old English teacher in this school. He was an old gentleman who's from England to teach us English language. He gave each of us an English name based on our Chinese names' pronunciations. Since then, I'm also known as Peter.

FS: *Seems like you had a good time in this school?*

Peter: Yes, I very much enjoyed these two years. As a result, I gave it a score of 8. When I was 12 years old, I returned to the local school in my home town. It was because the reputation of this private school started to be faded. Anyone can attend this school as long as their parent could pay a big amount of money. It was very good when I started. We, 20 classmates, decided to boycott this school by not attending this school anymore. You now can understand why I had returned my local school. It was not bad

to come back and I regrouped with my old friends. So, the next two years were still a happy time for me. I would give it a score of 8 as well.

**FS:** *What happened when you were 15 years old?*

**Peter:** At the age 15, I was preparing the exam and going to attend a junior high school in my home town. My parents have four children, and I'm my father's favourite son. He thinks I'm a clever one among the four children, although, I don't think I'm clever than my sisters and brother. When I finished my primary school years, my father thought I would be able get in a key/prestige junior high school based his assumption of my good exam results. I knew that I wouldn't be able to get in a more prestige school. At the end, it approved that I was right. My exam results were not good enough to land me in a key/prestige junior high school. However, my father was not going to give up. He paid thousands of pounds to get me in a top junior high school. I felt a bit guilty about it.

In the next three years, I was just an ordinary student in the class. My performance in the class was just in the middle, not bad and certainly not good enough to make tutors to notice me. The only exception was happened on the third year of my junior school. For some reason, I found the subject of chemistry become so attractive and I put in lots of time to study hard. The efforts were paid of. I got a top mark for this subject. As a result, I was mentioned in the class for the progress I made. It was quite something [*laughter*]. Apart from this, my three years in junior high did have any high lights and I was just an ordinary student. It may have explained why I give a score of 7 for these three years.

**FS:** *What happened after your junior school years?*

**Peter:** My story of junior school years didn't end there. Normally, once you complete a 3-year junior high school, you will then progress to the senior high school in the Chinese education system. For me, it did not happen that way. On the third year, my whole family moved to Guangzhou, a big city next to Hong Kong. My father purchased a property in this big city. The schools in Guangzhou did not recognise my junior high school leaving exam results. At the time, my father was ready to pay a much higher fee to get me and my sister in a top senior high school in Guangzhou. I felt it's not right to pay my way into a key school again. If I have done that, I will feel guilty again for a long time. So, I decided to re-attend the last year of junior high school in Guangzhou. My father just paid for my sister to get in a top senior high school.

Re-attending the third years of junior high school in Guangzhou wasn't easy for me. It was most dramatic change in my school years. As a young boy from a small town, it was so different to study in a metropolitan city. I believe that the experience of studying in Guangzhou has changed me in many ways.

**FS:** *It sounds fascinating. Could you please explain it in more details?*

**Peter:** Most students in Guangzhou speak Cantonese which I didn't speak. My language is another dialect and it is very different from Cantonese. In the beginning of my school in Guangzhou, the local students didn't speak to me. Even they did, I couldn't

understand them. I walked to school every day since it's not very far from my new home. In my home town, I used to ride a bike to school every day. It was quite different. At that time, I believed students from the countryside don't study hard and they just want to make some money after leaving schools, having more knowledge doesn't necessarily mean you're going to earn more money. However, in big cities like Guangzhou, I found most students study very hard in order to have a better future.

I ended up studying very hard and try to catch up with others. I remember there were 8 classes for the third year of junior high in my school. I was in the class eight, which was the worst performed class in the school. Many classmates were either underperformed local students or immigrant students from other places in China. I fall into the latter category. My efforts of catching up made a significant difference. At the end of academic year, another immigrant student and I became the first and second highest exam result holders across the whole school.

FS: *It was quite an achievement.*

Peter: Yes. It made me very proud of myself [*laughter*]. At the age of 18, I was enrolled into a top senior high school based on junior high school leaving exam. My father didn't pay my way into it instead I made my way into it. I felt it wonderful. So, you can see that I gave a measurement of 8 to represent my happiness.

FS: *What happened for the next three years?*

Peter: I spend the next three years in this top senior high school. Life wasn't easy for me. The competition among students was intense. I wasn't able to get top 2 places in the exams but I was one of top 50 high performed students. Considering there were so many of talented students from the whole city district, it wasn't bad at all to be one of top 50 students. My school years were like a 100-year war. It was not only testing your talent but also your endurance of hard working. On the graph, I gave a score 7.8 for my experience during these times.

I believe that I passed my tests for both abilities. After three years in the senior high school, I scored high in the national university entrance exam and I was enrolled in a prestige university in China at the age of 21.

FS: *How do you say about your university experience in China?*

Peter: In my view, it's very difficult to get in one of Chinese universities but it's easy to graduate. It's differing from what is happening in western universities. In the western universities, it's easier to get enrolled but difficult to graduate from. My two years' university life in China was both exciting and less satisfying. It was exciting to gather together with other students from other parts of China. There was less pressure on the study. However, it seems less satisfying as well. Once in the university, I started to think what I am going to do in my life in the future. These two years did not make me feel that I know how I can achieve my future goals, and feel that I have the ability to achieve my goals. For these reasons, I give a score of 7.5 to my university experience in China.

FS: *Ok, let us talk about your experience so far in the UK?*



Peter: I came to the UK in September 2008. Although I have finished two years' university study in China, I joined Liverpool Hope University from the second year. It is due to the different higher education system. In China, it takes you 4 years to complete an undergraduate study but in the UK it only takes 3 years. In the first month, I gave a score of 7.8 which is higher than the score I gave to my university experience in China. It is mainly because of the fact that I expected more here than in China. One reason is that it is not everyone has the opportunity of studying overseas. So, I had a reasonably higher expectation. From the beginning, I knew that Britain is neither a haven nor hell to study here.

In the first few days, I was very happy to be here. I actively attend many induction sessions and other activities the Student Union organised. For instance, one evening, I attended a formal dinner in the university canteen for students who lived in the same hall. You know, you had to dress formally to attend this kind of event but I liked it because it was something I never tried before and it was part of western culture.

Unfortunately, for the same reason (different cultures), this excitement was faded gradually. I lived in a hall with some year one UK undergraduate students. One of their cultures is the drinking culture, which I didn't find much fun out of it and I didn't like it either. My keenness of getting involved with local students decreased. Also, in the beginning of the course, I found that the teaching methods used here is very different from the Chinese ones. For all of these reasons, the scores I gave to my experience are getting lower and lower – 7.8 in September, 7.6 in October 2008, 7.5 in November 2008, 7.5 in December 2008 and 7.3 in January 2009.

After first three months, I had some thinking in December 2008 on what I needed to do in a different culture and learning environment. I then thought that I don't have to like all British cultures, in particular of drinking culture. Different teaching methods here might be very good for me to adapt to them. It is just one of reasons why I came to study here. After these thinking, I adjusted myself and was ready to face the new student life here.

FS: ***But why the score you gave for January 2009 even lower?***

Peter: Oh, I didn't prepare for the fact of the homesick. January is Chinese New Year time. At that time, I practically missed my family. I asked my Chinese friends here and they felt the same. For this reason, I give a score of 7.3, a lowest point in my UK experience so far.

FS: ***What happened in February, March and April 2009?***

Peter: Following three months after the Chinese New Year. I started to adjust myself to cope with the challenges mentioned above. I had some more thinking on what I really want to do in the future. Once I knew what I intended to do in the future, I became happier and more energetic in my study. Apart from my university study, I'm also studying for the exams of ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants). It's time-consuming and difficult to pass all its 14 exams in order to get certified. In the process of preparing and taking these exams, you can imagine the difficulties of studying a separate subject along with my degree. Sometimes I want to give it up. Then think it

again and keep on working hard on it. I know it's going to be important to fulfil my career goals. So, I keep telling myself: yes, you can do it and they are just 14 exams.

**FS:** *Now think back, what have been major influences on your education so far?*

**Peter:** I think it's my family in particular my father. My attitude towards education has changed over time. When I was a kid, I didn't like to study because my father gave me impression that having your own business is full of fun and you don't need to be highly educated to have your own business and get rich. My father was actually educated at senior high school level and was once a school teacher. When I was in high school, sometimes my father talked about my possible career in the future. Through these discussions, he convinced me that it's not always good choice to have your own business. It may sound wonderful but it's actually full of hardship, pressure and risk. One maybe is better of being a civil servant with a stable income. In China, as you know, if you want to be a civil servant, you have to be highly educated. Because of my father's influence and my own thinking on my future, I studied hard and performed well in high schools just like I mentioned before. By the way, in senior school I thought I would be medical doctor in the future. So, I studied Chemistry as my major subject. In one of our conversations, my father asked if I know how long it takes to become medical specialist before I can make a decent life. There wasn't anyone as a doctor in my family. I thought my father maybe is right. I subsequently changed my major subject to History. When I went to university in China, I accidentally enrolled on an English major course. Life is full of changes [*laughter*] and my father has influenced me most in these changes.

**FS:** *What motivated you to study in the UK since you're already enrolled in a prestige university in China?*

**Peter:** I think there were mainly three reasons. Firstly, when I studied in the university in China, I studied hard for a better future. Ironically, many classmates surround me spent most of their time playing computer game. I lived in the university accommodation with another 3 boys. In the same room, it was embarrassing if you're studying while others are playing. I found myself didn't fit in the environment. I thought studying in the UK shouldn't have this problem. Secondly, when I went to Guangzhou to study, I didn't speak any Cantonese. In order to learn the language or, let's say, the dialect, I kept listening the radio; watching Cantonese TV programmes; and listening others talk. Gradually, I could understand and speak the language. Likewise, I thought if I want to improve my English, studying in the UK maybe is a good idea since it provides a good English speaking environment. Thirdly, studying in the UK, in my view, will broaden my life experience.

**FS:** *So far, what have been the main benefits of studying in the UK?*

**Peter:** The main benefit, I would say, is that I become more mature and independent on my thinking and decision making. Secondly, due to the distance from the home, I sometimes feel the loneliness. I consider the loneliness could be a good thing in your life. I know that many of my adult friends have such experience in their life because they work from home in China. The third benefit is closer relationship with your family and friend. It is a bit hard to explain. Since I'm away from home, I haven't seen my family for months now. I miss them and I start to treasure my relationship

with them even more. Let me give you an example: if someone hasn't eaten for three days, s/he will treasure it if you give the person a meal.

**FS:** *To what extent has studying in the UK changed your values and beliefs?*

**Peter:** I just have been in the UK for about a year. I don't think, in such a short period, studying in the UK has changed my values and beliefs.

**FS:** *To what extent has English language proficiency been a challenge in your study in the UK? Can you give me some examples?*

**Peter:** Firstly, I find differing English accents have created problems for me. Although I now can understand 90% of my tutors' accents but it will be very difficult if I happen to listen to somebody else with a new accent. Let me give you an example, last week I contacted my mobile phone service provider over the phone to make a change to my contract. It was extremely difficult for me to understand the guy on the phone. He had a very strong accent and it's alien to me. I believe I will get better on this once I've listened to different accents for a while. Hopefully, there are not that many accents in the UK. Secondly, I've found it difficult to understand some words in a different context. For example, a same word in accounting has a very different meaning from its normally understood. Another issue for me is the struggle to switch between my first language / dialect and English. Most of the time, I use my dialect to think before I write or speak it in English. For instance, if you ask for my mobile phone number in English, I couldn't tell you straight away because I have to use my first language to think what it is and then translate it in English for you. It's rather a daunting task sometimes.

**FS:** *How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of English language?*

**Peter:** For listening, I just have to listen more from the radio or TV. It's a shame that I haven't got a TV at the moment. I will get one when I move out next year. For the use of vocabulary, I normally go to the Writing Centre to ask for the help.

**FS:** *Do you have difficulties with writing for academic purposes? For instance, writing your assignments? If yes, what challenges do you face?*

**Peter:** Firstly, when I write in English for academic purposes, I tend to write complex long sentences. It makes my writing. I now notice that experienced writers tend to use short and simple sentences. It makes the writing clearer and stronger. I think I need to learn from this new approach.

Secondly, the challenge for writing an assignment is determined how well you understand the subject which you're required to write about. For example, I'm studying BA Business and English Language. There was a module in the study of English Language, Psycholinguistics. For me, it was an uninteresting and difficult subject. There were many jargons in this area. Subsequently, it made my writing for this module extremely difficult.

Thirdly, lack of vocabulary is another challenge for me in the writing. In order to make the writing interesting and colourful for the readers, I need to use different words to describe the same meaning. For instance, if you intend to say something is

significant, you couldn't keep using the word 'important'. It's also no way to use the Chinese English (Chinglish) in the writing.

Another challenge for me is to use the reference in the writing. In China, we used to have a tendency to write about our own opinions but without saying how we developed these ideas. In the UK, there are stricter requirement of referencing. It requires a much wider reading and build up your arguments upon the previous research. I think it's good thing because readers can trace the development of the literature in a particular field, and how you have developed your ideas.

FS: ***How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of academic writing in English?***

Peter: Apart from taking advantage help from the Writing Centre, I start to read more not only academic publications but also publication from the mass media. Listening to the radio and watching TV programmes is another good way of improving my vocabulary. I always pick up some lively and interesting words from my reading and listening..

FS: ***Have you found teaching and learning styles in the UK challenging? For instance, how are they different from Chinese learning styles in your previous education?***

Peter: The first difference is 'independent learning'. In high school, teachers were apt to tell you everything you need to learn; in my university years in China, I thought there was more independent learning. University tutors didn't ask us to do any more of exercises but they still provided us with the reading list for the modules. Sometimes, they even told us in advance which particular areas will be tested in the exam. Since I got here, I realised there is more independent learning. Tutors seem like they even don't care if you know the key reading list for the modules; and if you can get hold of books.

The second difference is class atmosphere. Here in the UK, class atmosphere is more relaxed. Students have more freedom to speak out whenever and whatever they want. In Chinese universities, students likely prepare for the class discussion beforehand. Here, students seem like they can speak out even they don't have a very good idea.

The third difference, in my experience, is the less interaction / engagement in students' group discussion. Students appear to spend more time to talk about something else rather than the discussion topics. I remember I was once relocated to another group for one of Business module, an English student was very happy to have the discussion with me on the business subject because normally he spent less time to discuss the subject matter and more time on something else with his English peers.

The fourth difference is the student-staff relationship. From my sixth sense, I believe I have a closer relationship with Chinese tutors in my previous university. Here I've only got to know well one of teaching staff.

The fifth difference is the difficulty level of passing assignment. Here in the UK, it's more difficult for me to pass or gain a good mark from my assignment especially if you want to have a better class of degree to apply for a good university for a postgraduate course afterwards. It is mainly caused by the fact that English is my

second, or to say, my third language. It requires more time and more work to achieve the same mark comparing with the local students. Also, I consider my memory isn't great. I couldn't remember clearly about my childhood. It has a great impact on the exams here because I'm required to write about 2000 words in many exams.

FS: ***How do you cope with/manage/respond to the challenges of different teaching and learning styles?***

Peter: For the assignment matter, I tend to spend more time to understand the subject better in order to gain a better mark. I don't like the idea of writing any assignments just based on the assessment criteria.

FS: ***Have you found it difficult to work / communicate with others (for instance, the local students, other international students and tutors) in your study?***

Peter: For my Chinese students, I found I have developed an even closer relationship with them. For local classmates, my interaction with them is limited in the class. For some reason, I found most of them less mature than I am, and I don't share any similar interests with them. So far, I haven't made any local friend. Actually, I don't mind of it. I would rather spending more time on the study than drinking with them just for the sake of making a few local friends.

FS: ***Do you have any other difficulties or challenges which you think have significantly affected your study in the UK?***

Peter: No.

FS: ***What support do you receive from your peers (e.g. Chinese friends and classmates) and other social groups?***

Peter: For academic support, I normally go to the Writing Centre. For other well-being matters, I don't normally seek counselling or help for friends. I write online diary to express and comfort myself. It's more a public blog but with an anonymised online ID. I found it very helpful to record or share my happiness or struggling. I'm doing this not for the fame or publicity. It's just a way of express my feelings. It's just like talking to a friend.

FS: ***Do you think there is sufficient learning support available for you?***

Peter: If I gave it a score, I would give it 6 out of 10. It's mainly because (a) I don't know what services they provide. There is not much of the publicity on this; (b) there are few activities organised for international students. It seems like only a few activities organised by the Chaplaincy.

FS: ***What further support would you like to receive from the university?***

Peter: I never thought about this.

FS: ***Have I missed any questions out? Or are there any other questions you want to add?***

Peter: No, I think you have covered pretty much all aspects of my experience.

FS: *Is there anything you would like to ask me?*

Peter: You as a Chinese origin and have been here for many years, I'd like to know what your experience is like over the time.

FS: *It's a good question. I shall write about my experience in the thesis and then shall share with you later. If you don't mind, today we focus on your experience.*

Peter: I'm looking forward to reading your experience. Thanks for the interview and I found all questions very interesting and intriguing.

FS: *Thank you for your help in the research. Good-bye.*

Peter: Good-bye.

END OF TRANSCRIPT AND TRANSLATION

## Appendix 8: Student learning journeys

### *Mikki*

Mikki is a 24 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and Law course. She has been studying here for four year. Prior to studying in the UK, she studied in Japan for two years. She is from an inland city in northern China. I taught Mikki when she was on a foundation year course prior to her degree. Later, she kindly agreed to participate in this research when I invited her to be a research subject in February 2009.

A few days before the one-to-one interview, I asked Mikki to recall and locate her learning experience on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest while 10 is the highest score). Figure 8.1 represents her attempt of assessing the value of her learning experience as she perceived from 8 years old age to 24. Figure 8.2 represents her assessment of learning experience in the UK between September 2005 and January 2009.

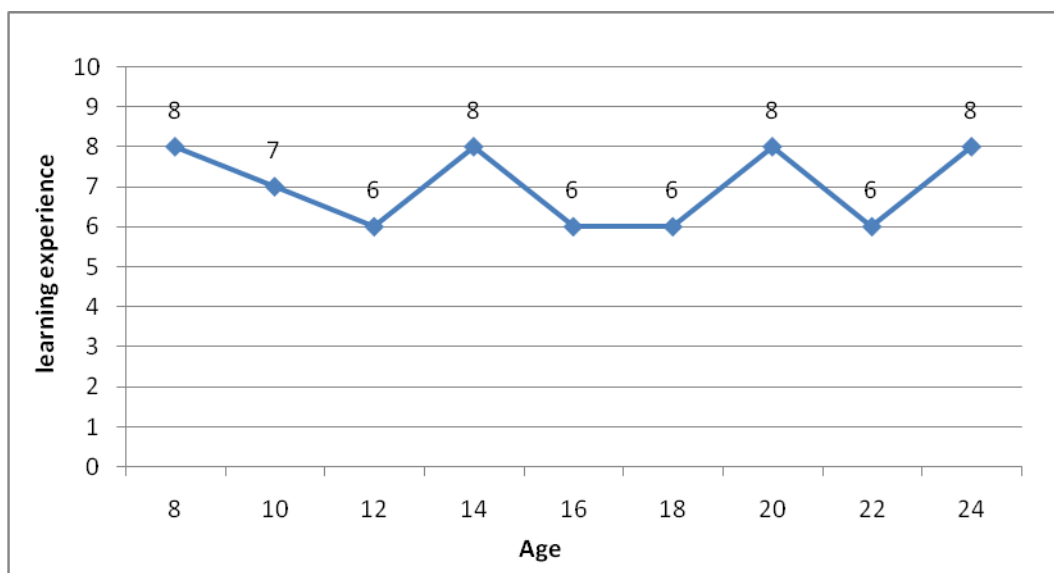


Figure 8.1: Mikki's perception of her learning experience from the ages of 8 to 24

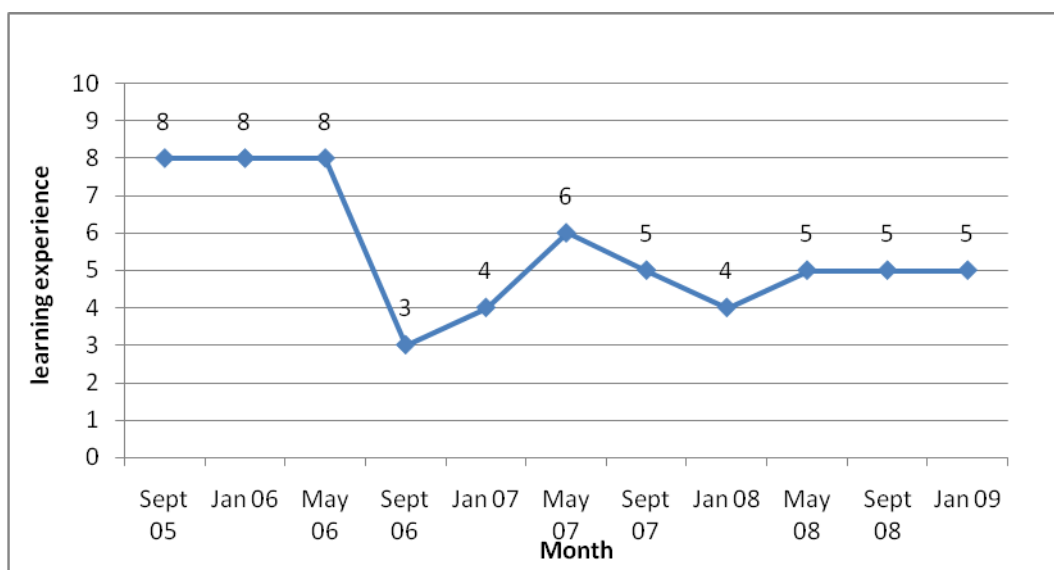


Figure 8.2: Mikki's perception of her learning experience in the UK between September 05 and January 09

*I am an overseas student doing a BA Business with Law in Liverpool Hope University since 2006. My home town is located in the middle of China, and is famous for the coal industry and vinegar products. I am from a typical three member family in China. I have received an education from the age of 5, I used to study in the school during the day and join the evening special skill classes every day: the reason for this was that my parents wanted me to have a bright future, therefore, I learned painting, dancing and singing and many more other skills at an early age. I enjoyed spending time with my family.*

*I am always fascinated by language. This passion for language has driven me to attend different language courses, such as taking General Japanese as my second language course outside school. Luckily, my parents supported me to study overseas after I finished high school. I believed that was a great opportunity to develop my skills further, and therefore, I decided to study in a Japanese college in Tokyo in 2002.*

*Things were not as easy as I thought in the beginning of my life in Japan, as a teenager, because I was used to growing up beside my parents--they looked after my daily life. After I went to Japan, my life changed dramatically. I stayed in accommodation which was on the top floor of my college, I started to learn how to cook meals and get on with foreign tutors and class mates. Unfortunately, about half year after I started studying in that college, I received the first exam result, which was not good at all. It shocked me more than ever. I started to notice that a good balance of study and life was hard. Maybe because of my childish age, I blamed the cruel environment at that time, and did not think that I could do better if I tried harder. However, I am a very competitive person and do not like losing, because I do not want to waste my life and parents' money, so I started to do my best in the study and making more friends. Since then, my life was getting better and better, I started to hang out with many friends and felt happier, and I got my first class Japanese language certification in 2004, then a year later I finished college, which was also the end of my days in Japan.*

*There was no particular reason for coming to England. It was only out of my interest. I love to know new stuff and experience different life styles, maybe because of the historical building design and the attractiveness of the special European romantic city life style, or the world famous higher education system or maybe because I am meant to be here in my life, who knows. I went on the plane to this unknown country – England—in the summer of 2005. I came here and entered the higher level education in Liverpool Hope University. Refreshing my memory of the last 4 years, I went through a lot. In the beginning of my International Foundation Programme year, I missed Japan and my friends over there so much, I was used to the 'easy-busy-Japanesy' days, when I came to England, after the exciting fresh period, everything in my life suddenly turned to be so boring and slow, however, as I learned from the life experience in Japan that if you cannot change the environment, change yourself. So I started to work hard at 'academic English' and make new friends, enjoy the new life, then I was slowly accepted by this historical and passionate place. I started to think this life is not bad at all. It is all about the way to enjoy it.*

*English is my third language. In the beginning of my university life, how to use proper academic English to finish the report was hard work for me. I was always mixed up in my head between Japanese and English. Luckily, I did not try to think about those two languages in Chinese, otherwise it would be a nightmare. In my opinion, a good way to master a language is to use it as much as you could. At the same time, try not to think it in the same*



way as your first language. In other words, try to use and think English in English, then you may have the feeling of English (if you know what I mean here).

*I am also passionate to work with people from different cultures. This was mainly influenced throughout my seven years overseas study and work in Japan and England. During that period of time, I was given the opportunity to travel, to meet new people, to experience a new culture, and, above all, to master good Japanese and English. Studying in Japan and England is a worthwhile experience for me. Until now, I have been studying and working in different countries, and one skill in particular that contributed was my confident public speaking. The study and working experience is both inspiring and educational.*

*I am looking forward to completing my degree in Liverpool Hope University this year and joining the postgraduate study in Liverpool University after then. I would like to challenge myself to go hunt for a great job in the future. For instance, in 5 years, I would like to try to open my own business, work in a business administration department, or go travelling around the world, those are all my dreams. Finally, I would like to give myself a 10 for my learning experience, because it is an incredible asset to my life.*

### **Rita**

Rita is a 21 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Study course. She came to the UK in September 2008, and she has been studying here for almost one year. Prior to that, she studied in a university in China for two years. Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with her current university in the UK. She is from a small town in southern China. I got to know Rita via another participant in this study in February 2009.

Rita's graphs of her learning experiences between the age of 6 and 21, and of her learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.3 and 8.4 respectively.

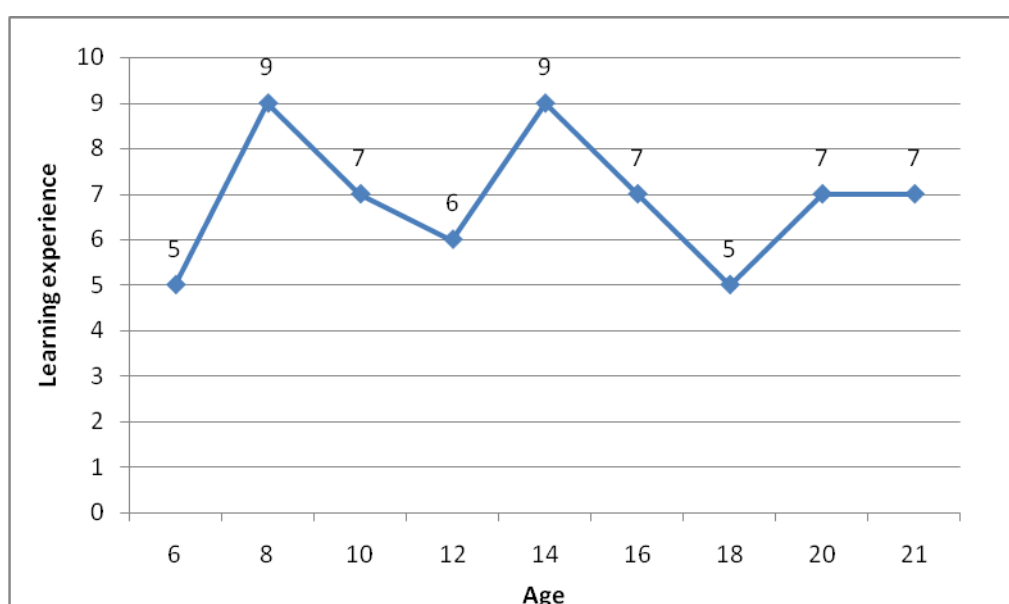


Figure 8.3: Rita's perception of her own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 21 years old

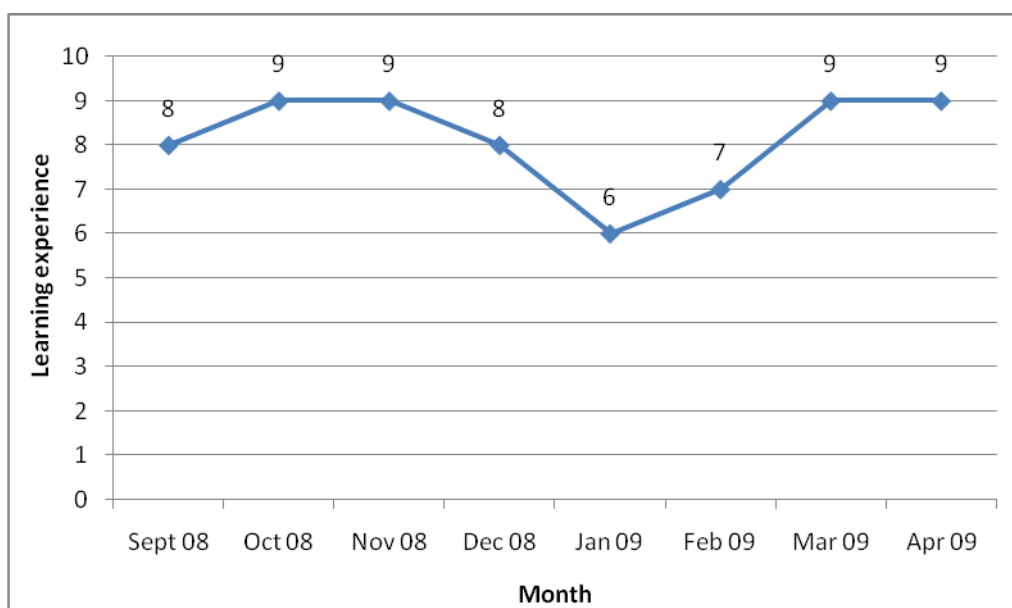


Figure 8.4: Rita's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*I come from Nan Zhuang, a small town in Foshan City, Guangdong Province, China. It's well known for the ceramics industry as well as the serious air pollution. Like many other places in the eastern coastal area, Nan Zhuang benefits from the opening-up policy beginning from the 1980s and has developed its own competitive industry. Yet, the problem of pollution arises as a major concern. Plus the effects of the energy crisis, many factories had to close down or relocate to another place offering lower land rent, thus leaving those companies with strong economic strength.*

*My father used to be a technician and now has built up his own business in this industry. My mother works with him helping with managing the finance of the company. Throughout the years, their individual development is closely tied to the development of the town also with ups and downs. I am the eldest child in the family with one brother and one sister.*

*I finished my first 6 years of schooling at a small primary school in my hometown. During those days, my parents were busy and did not spend much time with me, but I never felt lonely. It simply gave me much freedom to play outside with my cousins and schoolmates. I studied hard, played hard and did pretty well in all subjects including English, the compulsory course from Grade Four. At the beginning, the new subject raised my curiosity. With a good study habit, it did not take much effort for me to get good results in the early exams. These little achievements and the teacher's praise fed my vanity and gave me the confidence to carry on.*

*In 2000, my parents sent me to a boarding high school near the city of Guangzhou. I spent the following 6 years there. My world suddenly became much bigger and more complicated as my classmates came from different places. Getting along with them was another story compared to the old days with my friends in my hometown. Some of my high school classmates have become my real friends and we keep in touch till now, but I prefer to classify many of them as only classmates. We did meet sometimes in the occasions of old classmates' gatherings, yet conversations were always limited and less and less would come as time went by.*

*When I recall my high school years, Miss Xu is the person I frequently think of. She was my English teacher through my junior high school years. The first thing she taught me was not an article in the textbook. It was an English song. Her teaching was always cheerful and inspiring. I enjoyed it very much. I felt that learning English could be great fun. Miss Xu also made me realize that English is simply a skill but a useful one. It's a key to the door for the outside world and she taught me how to open it.*

*I kept on doing well in all subjects until I went to the senior high school. Mathematics and physics became my headache. Sometimes I found my efforts were in vain no matter how hard I worked on the two subjects. As I had a preference for English, I decided to choose English as my major in university. Finally, I successfully entered the university I applied for.*

*My major was business English. Yet, the study there was beyond my expectations. There were so many students in one faculty that lecturers were far from enough. Sometimes one professor would give a lecture to more than 300 students. Although we were encouraged to speak English as much as possible, most of the time after class, Chinese was dominant. My English did not improve as much as I expected. I began to ask myself what I was there for.*

*At the end of my first year, I heard of the exchange program with a university in the UK and a group of senior students had come here. They did pretty well in the new environment. I got in contact with some of them on the internet and asked the questions that concerned me. Their answers gave me the first impression of the new university. It was not bad. I started to think of the idea. I knew that my parents could afford the expense of my studying abroad. Money was not an issue. It should not be too difficult being away from home for a couple of years. I viewed it as an opportunity to become more independent. My English was good enough. If not, I should soak myself into the native environment, triggering my sense of language. Besides, as English is a tool, it should definitely be used and made useful. Otherwise what did I learn it for? It just opened up a wider world for me to explore. What was I still waiting for? The decision was not hard to make. Therefore, almost five months later, I set foot in Liverpool, for the first time.*

*It is more than half a year since I came to Liverpool. My course is business and English studies, similar to what I was learning previously. Generally, things are going well with me. As we came in a group, we help each other in daily life and study. I can see myself grow. Yet, I face some challenges.*

*First, study is always a big issue. Here, you can never fool around and still get good mark. I really have to step forward and finely engage myself. Being knowledgeable is not enough. Critical thinking is highly appreciated. It is the same situation in China, but education here pays more attention to it and the system here is well developed. Students have more responsibility and freedom for their study. I found it hard to get used to the difference at first and I am still exploring my own way of learning and making adjustments as needed.*

*Second, my language is not as good as I thought. It was not until I came here that I realized my English is too textbook like. Sometimes I felt awkward as I could not name the simplest daily stuff around me. I spend most of my spare time with my Chinese friends. Speaking Chinese is natural among us. It just impedes my improvement. Now, I try to speak English instead even with my Chinese friends. And if possible, I chat with native people.*

*Last but not least, it is the relationship with the native students. So far, most of them I meet are friendly and helpful. Yet, I have not made good friends with any of them. It seems that there is still a huge gap between us. It's my problem. I always feel secure being with my Chinese friends. So I did not try hard to break the ice.*

*Overall, it is the right choice to go abroad and well worth the money for a different life experience. I enjoy my study here although sometimes I do miss my family and friends in China. I plan to apply for an MA degree after graduation as I would like to further my study. Talking about the future, I see myself probably going back to China and finding a job later on. But I am not sure to say anything definite, and I do not like making long-term plans. Five years is a long time at my age. Anyhow, I will work hard to find and earn what I really want for my life.*

### **Mia**

Mia is a 23 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA English Language course. She came to the UK in September 2007, and she has been studying here for almost two years. Prior to that, she studied in a university in China for two years. Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with her current university. She is from a coastal countryside area in southern China. I got to know Mia via a Chinese student gathering in 2007. Later, she kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited her to be a research subject.

Mia's graphs of her learning experiences between the age of 6 and 22, and of her learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.5 and 8.6 respectively.

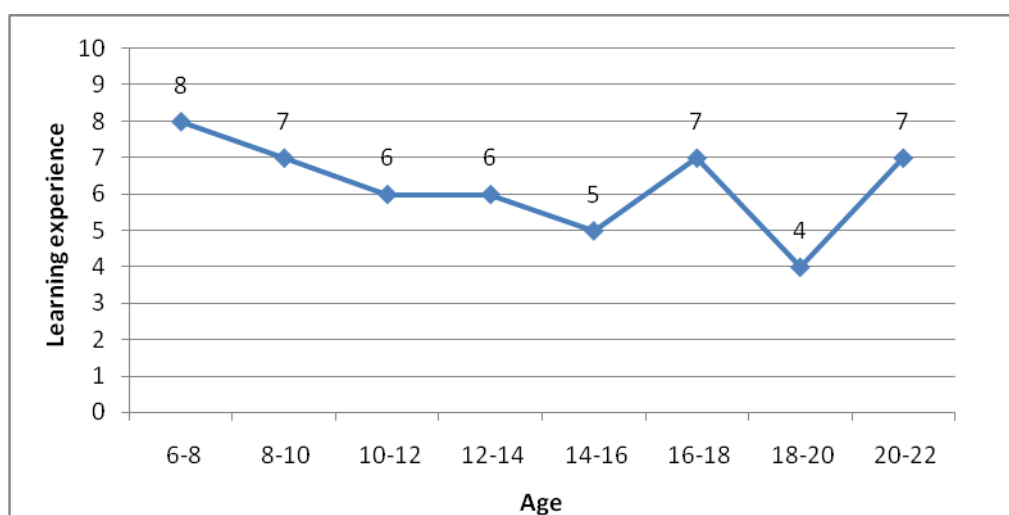


Figure 8.5: Mia's perception of her own learning experience between the ages of 6 to 22 years old

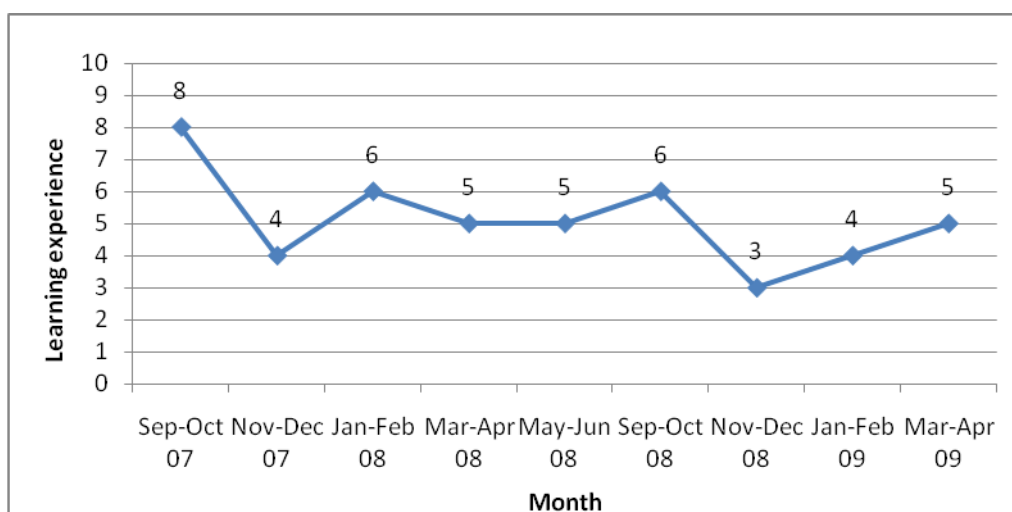


Figure 8.6: Mia's perception of her learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009

*My name is Mia. I was born and brought up in South China. My hometown is located by the Zhujiang River. When I was a child, it was only a small coastal village, with a small population. Fishery, shipping, shipbuilding and trade were the main industries at that time. Life was not as easy as today. I remember my parents telling me that people often left here to seek a better life in Shenzhen, one of China's five large Special Economic Zones. Some people might even stow away to Hong Kong, which was still under the British government at that moment, and they believed they could earn more money in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, China's policy of reform and opening-up brought about great development for my hometown. Tertiary industry, especially the cloth industry and manufacturing, leapt on to a large scale. Nowadays, it turns out to be a modern city, with a big population and semi-developed tertiary industry.*

*There are four people in my family: my father, my mother, me and my younger sister. My parents used to run a grocery store. According to the best recollection of my memory of my childhood, my sister and I spent most of our time in my grandparents' house, because father and mother were always busy working in order to make a better living for us. However, my father perceived that there was going to be a rapid growth in real estate market. In a few years, with enough self-funding, my parents started a Real Estate Company. The business has run so well that it did change our life. We moved into a large house and even bought cars. My sister and I were able to study at university because the company provided sufficient money.*

*I was fortunate enough to receive the best basic education in my hometown. From Grade 1 to Grade 4 in my primary school, I learned Chinese, maths, P.E., art, moral course and natural science. English was introduced in Grade 5. I suppose my motivation of learning English was not as great as the school motto – to modernize China; I learned it only because it was a course in my school but later I found interest in it. The English lessons started with learning the letters "abc", English songs and some simple dialogues, such as "A: Hello! How are you? B: I'm fine, thank you. And you?" These actually made English easier for us. Me and my classmates used these English words in our daily conversation. I was often impressed by the stories, origins and customs about English.*

*English course became difficult in the secondary school level, and therefore I had to work harder to succeed. The textbook contains longer articles and a full page of vocabulary. Teachers usually asked us to memorize the entire lexicon, a short paragraph and even a full text. The tapes were played every morning, so that we could listen to the native spoken English and correct our pronunciation. Besides explanation of the texts and vocabulary, grammar, semantics and syntax were taught in the class. Massive listening, reading and writing training was imposed on us. The examination gradually turned out to be an important standard to judge our English competence. English was not as much fun as before. Once I struggled with the idea that learning English was only to pass the exams and get a chance to enter the university. "But is it really what I want?"*

*In university, I had selected Translation and Interpretation (mainly between English and Chinese) as my major, through which I am hoping to make English my career. During my first two academic years, my listening and speaking skills have been strengthened alongside with reading and writing skills. There were chances for us to communicate with the teachers from English-speaking countries. We intended to access English literature, movies and news reports. The study of translation made me realize that using languages is not only based on linguistic training, but also cultural understanding. Therefore, besides learning Chinese, English and French, I had taken other relevant modules, for instance Society and culture of U.K., American society and culture, Chinese culture, Chinese folklores, Communicative Competence, and European Society -- From Renaissance to Early Modern Period etc. These actually give me lots of informative resources behind the languages, and eventually my curiosity towards English came back.*

*Being an exchange student in Liverpool prepares me for the practical experience in using English and interacting with people from all over the world. The reason that I chose to study in UK was because I regarded this as a great opportunity for me to broaden my horizon, to see a non-China world and to further my study in English. I have been studying here for nearly two years. My undergraduate modules are Language and cultural identity in Britain, History and development of English, Aspects of Psycholinguistics, Literature 1660-1900, Stylistics, Global English and Language in society, etc., and these provide me with a broader understanding of languages and human communications.*

*Although I have learned English for many years, there are still a lot of challenges. Lacking the knowledge of local culture and values is probably one of the problems. Sometimes, we found it difficult to understand the dialects, colloquial idioms and some pronunciations. Also we need to pay attention to various ideologies in order to express ourselves more clearly, for example towards politics, people from the East might have a different view from those from the West or a Muslim world. In such situations, I would often ask the speakers to explain the matter to me once more. If I am still confused I will look for more information on it. Another challenging issue is in my study. Since I had never wrote an assignment longer than 1,500 words, each essay requiring more than 2,000 and even 3,000 words seems a bit overwhelming to me. I am not a perfect English user either. My tutors and staff from the writing centre are very kind to give me a hand. They guide me to re-structure my coursework and correct the grammatical errors. The British educational system does help me to acquire the analytic skills and critical thinking in a further step.*

*After graduation, I am planning to pursue a postgraduate course which is related to English. I hope to work in a multinational corporation or organization and meanwhile explore different languages and cultures.*

## Max

Max is a 24 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and Marketing course. He came to the UK in March 2005, and he has been studying here for four year. He is from an inland city in southern China. I taught Max on an ICT module when he was taking a foundation year course prior to his degree at Liverpool Hope University. Later, he kindly agreed to participate in this research when I invited him to be a research subject in February 2009.

Max's graphs of his learning experiences between the age of 6 and 21, and of his learning experiences in the UK between March 2005 and March 2009 are shown in Figure 8.7 and 8.8 respectively.

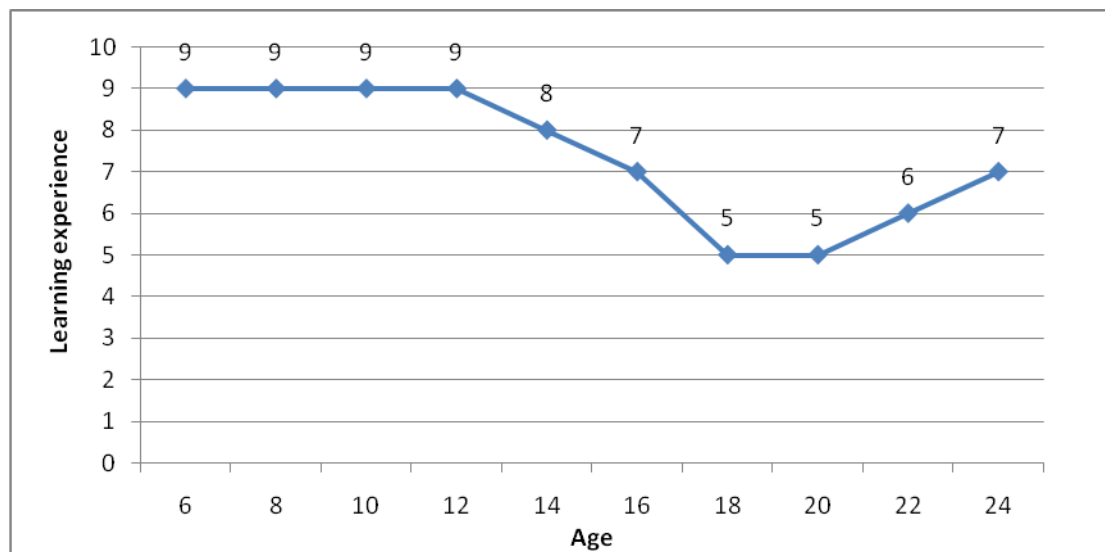


Figure 8.7: Max's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 6 to 24 years old

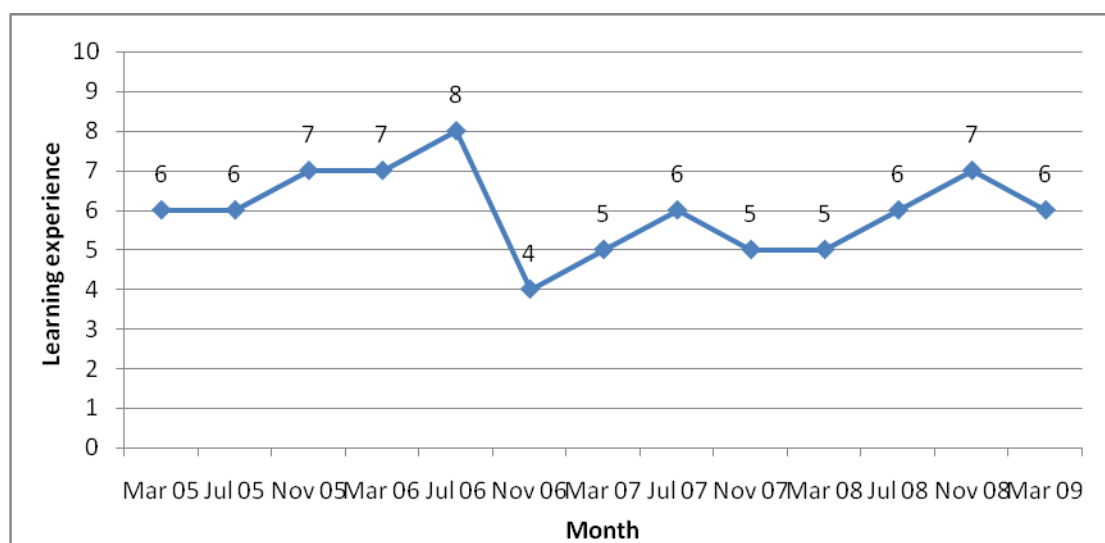


Figure 8.8: Max's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between March 2005 and March 2009

*How long I have been living here in Liverpool? My answer is four years. Four years is a long enough time to change a person's mind. In the past four years, I am sure I have dozens of stories to talk about.*

*I prefer to introduce myself a little bit as a beginning. I am Max, from Hefei which is a middle-size city in the east of China. I am the second child in my family, I have an older brother. My father has been running a small business for ages in the city of Chengdu, in the west of China. My mother decided to quit her job a long time ago because she has to take care of my brother and me. As I said, my father was doing his job in another city (Chengdu), but my brother and I had to stay in our home town for school.*

#### *Stage one: early life in Hefei and Chengdu*

*My early life was quite good. I did go to one of the best primary and Junior High schools in my city. I also did well in my studies. But my life was first time changed after I completed my junior school. That was the year 2001, my brother went to university. My father decided to transfer me to a Senior high School in Chengdu which is thousands of miles from my hometown. I was disappointed with his decision. But I had to go to Chengdu for my new life.*

*In China, everyone knows senior high school is important for a student's future. Senior high school with a high reputation is the key to go to top universities. I am sure my parents wanted me to go to one of the top universities. They just sent me to a top high school in Chengdu. But nothing positive happened. I was totally under stress. First of all, I did not like boarding school life. Second, I did not acclimatize myself to that new environment. After one term, I lost interest in my studies. My parents did not notice my issues, they still believed I could solve my difficulties. However, I did not have an attitude to study, I totally gave up.*

*Time flew to October 2003, the last year in my high school. The most important year for my life, but I did not see any hope because of my terrible exam results. I was struggling with my future. I was deeply lost. My father saw my confusion. He had a long conversation with me and offered me a chance to restart my life: go to England or Canada for a new life to re-think what I did in the past three years and what I have to do in the future. I did not give my answer to him immediately. I considered this chance for about one week. I would like to take this chance to fix my life, but on the other hand, I was afraid another failure was there waiting for me. Also I knew it would cost my father lots of money. But finally, I chose to go to England.*

*However, I failed to get a visa in September 2004 – I was upset a lot at that moment. After my father and I flew to Beijing three times in three months, I got my visa to England. There was a gap between September 2004 and March 2005. I did not waste it. I went to a specialist language school for a short term course. I thought it would help.*

*I was going to step into a new stage of my life. I called it the turning point of my life.*

#### *Stage two: language and foundation course in Liverpool Hope University*

*March 11<sup>th</sup> 2005, an important date for me, it was my first step on the land of England. To be honest, I never thought I would live abroad. But things happened. I had to face the way I had chosen. I knew there is a very very long road for me to walk along.*



*My father arranged a house for me to stay in. I lived with my relatives in Liverpool. I had to go to Liverpool Hope University for my three months language course, I enjoyed it very much. I met people from different countries and listened to them. It was an interesting experience for me. It was only three months, so it was not that difficult. I did quite well.*

*In October 2005, I entered into a new course which is called the international foundation program. This course was about the preparation for a bachelor degree. I did learn quite a lot of knowledge about the business field. My teachers were very good, they did help me a lot, for example, writing style, writing skill, speaking skill, pronunciation, academic theories and so on. I'd like to thank them.*

### *Stage three: my university life and studies*

*After passing this course, the next stage was for me to apply for a BA course. Following the university entry requirements, I did take a IELTS test, but I only got a 5.5. I found my English was not good at all. I chose to study BA Business and Marketing at Liverpool Hope University in October 2006. I chose this course with full interest. No other subjects can attract me. I have also dreamt to be a successful businessman. To be honest, I never came to regret my choice of this course.*

*A degree course is obviously hard for me. I concluded there were issues regarding my studies. First of all, I was lacking in language, there were millions of vocabulary I did not understand. Secondly, I just could not communicate with classmates well, the reason was I cannot understand their accent very well. The last reason and it was the most important reason, I spent less time on study. I knew I must work hard on my studies. But sometimes, I was just too lazy to finish my planned study.*

*Assessments were big challenges that bothered me as well. I had a bad habit. I never started my assignments early, I preferred to work it out just before the deadline. That often drove me crazy. It was my problem, but I just do not know how to solve it. In this case, I would never go to university's writing centre for help. Sometimes I felt I just lost a good opportunity to gain high marks on my assignments and to improve my English level. Lectures and seminars were good for me to learn. But I always could not follow what my tutors were saying. But I tried my best to catch it.*

*I am happy with my results, normally I got B grades or C grades, the average result was not bad at all for me. But I knew it was not enough for me to apply for a master degree. So I worked hard in my third year just looking for a 2:1 degree.*

*I have had a part job since my first year in the university. My friend introduced me to McDonald's, and I am working for McDonald's twice a week. It is an easy job. The only weakness of this job is that I have to work late at night. But it is all right now.*

*I know I still cannot speak good English, but I will try my best to learn. I chat with my classmates. I am not shy to speak up anymore. I believe I can make a huge improvement.*

*If I have to measure the quality of my learning experience, I'd like to give 7 as an overall.*

### *Stage four: my plans in the next five years*

*I am now applying for a master degree at the University of Liverpool, I will do business management or finance. After the master degree course, I would like to go home to start another new life.*

### **Vincent**

Vincent is a 23 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Language course. He came to the UK in September 2007, and he has been studying here for almost two years. Prior to that, he studied in a university in China for two years. His Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his current university. He is from a city in southern China. I got to know Vincent via a Chinese students gathering in 2007. Later, he kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited him to be a research subject.

Vincent's graphs of his learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of his learning experiences in the UK between Sept 2008 and Apr 2009 are shown in Figure 8.9 and 8.10 respectively.

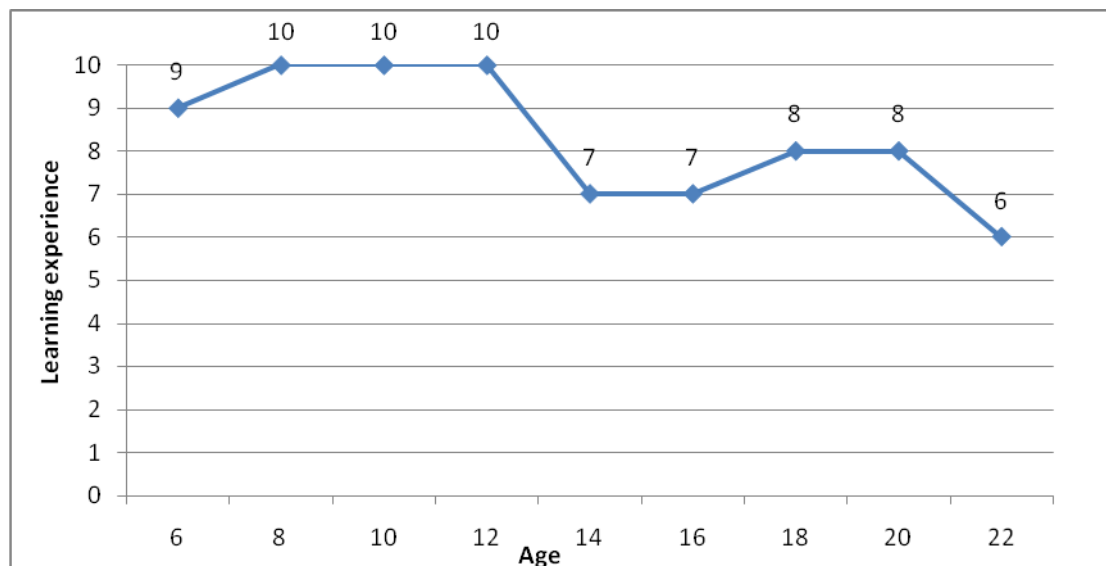


Figure 8.9: Vincent's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 22

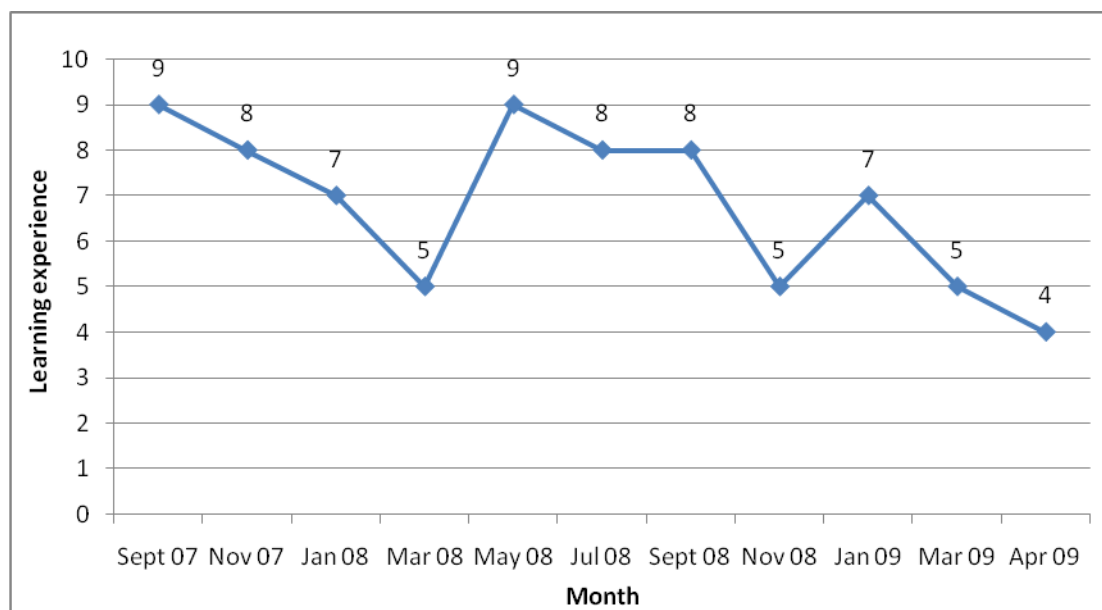


Figure 8.10: Vincent's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009

*I am from the City of Foshan, Guangdong, China. My hometown is situated in the heart of the Pearl Delta, one of the most prosperous areas of the country that has nurtured the prosperity of Hong Kong. Born at the time of the opening and revolution of China and in a place that took the lead, I am very lucky to benefit from the rapid change of the society and booming economy. My father was among the first who left a state-owned company and started his own business. He made his fortune from the early 1990s, a base on which he could afford to send me to the best primary school of the region. I started to learn English in the first year there. Since then, I have had a lengthy contact with English.*

*Deep in my mind when I was a little boy, I understood that English is very important for the future. Such a concept just went into one's mind unconsciously in response to the rapidly changing environment. But I didn't make English as my priority until I entered university. In China, we have great pressure to study throughout junior and senior high schools and English is only one of the many subjects we have to deal with. English education in China at that stage lays more emphasis on the foundation of grammar as well as the ability to read. Due to the lack of language environment, listening and speaking skills usually lagged behind. But even after I entered university, the situation has not changed much.*

*My major in university was Business Communication. But throughout the first two years, most of the courses were centred on English skills, divided in terms of reading, writing, listening and speaking. There were not many business courses at all. During the second year, there came a chance for the students in my school to take an exchange program with a university in Liverpool, UK. But the partnering university is not a famous one. Thus, not many students showed interest in the program. But I was one. There were quite a few good reasons for me to take the bet. First of all, having studied English for more than 10 years, I was not so satisfied with only taking English courses while as a matter of fact, I still couldn't communicate fluently in the language. Studying in UK would be a good chance for me to get higher proficiency. Second, I believed that it would be more challenging living in a new environment and studying under a completely different education system. I always aspire to be more independent and adaptable. Thus I love this challenge. Third, as this was an*

*exchange program, I would have my place in both universities and on my graduation, I would get two degrees. So, fundamentally, my bet would have nothing to lose. What's more, have studying experience in UK provides me with a better chance to pursue postgraduate studies in the country.*

*As was expected, studying in UK has been quite an interesting and challenging experience for me. Here, I do not need to study English for the purpose of English. Rather I study some new knowledge and concepts through the medium of English. At the same time my English proficiency has improved unconsciously. There have been difficulties though. The first was not about Liverpool scouse or communication or getting used to the teaching style but essay writing. When I was in China, writing was more about practising the language while the content was about narrating facts or subjectively arguing something based on our memory or perception. Here in UK, I need to read widely and learn to summarize and discuss others' works critically or apply theory in books to real life case. However, the prerequisite is that I can read widely and fast enough, which I was not able to do at the beginning. In addition, I had to get used to the reference system which I had never used before. Without any rehearsal or training, I faced and fought these sudden changes with what many Chinese students traditionally use: hard work. Also, I sought help from the writing centre of the university and frequently asked my tutors whenever I had problems.*

*Here in UK, I study both English and Business, which are quite a mismatch for me. On the one hand, although I am gaining appreciation of the issues that language modules cover, I am personally keener on business knowledge. On the other hand, in order to get better marks, I have to spend much more time on language modules with business ones lagging behind. But still I manage to achieve a lot. In the first year, I had an average mark of 70. In the second year, I have got A in all the assignments I did so far. Even in language modules, I came out top of the class in some assignments. I am always demanding of myself and want to pursue higher and better. That may be what drives me to be rigorous in my study. If I am asked to measure the quality of my learning experience, I will give it a 9.*

*Life in UK may be not as interesting and lively as in China. I have to spend most of the time in my room doing my study. In my perception, people here mostly hang out to drink, which is not to my taste. I mostly go out to buy food and I cook for myself every day. Before I came here, I did not cook at all. But now I am quite good at it. Here, I also have the chance to travel around the country to enrich my experience and broaden my mind.*

*After graduation, I am intending to pursue postgraduate studies in business in UK. I am hoping to study in the University of Warwick. I think that will give me an extra competitive advantage.*

### **Alex**

Alex is a 25 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a BA Business and Psychology course. He came to the UK in 2006, and he has been studying here for three year. He is from a coastal city in eastern China. I taught Alex on an ICT module when he was taking a foundation year course prior to his degree at Liverpool Hope University. Later, he kindly agreed to participate in this research when I invited him to be a research subject in February 2009.

Alex's graphs of his learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 25, and of his learning experiences in the UK between Sept 2006 and Apr 2009 are shown in Figure 8.11 and 8.12 respectively.

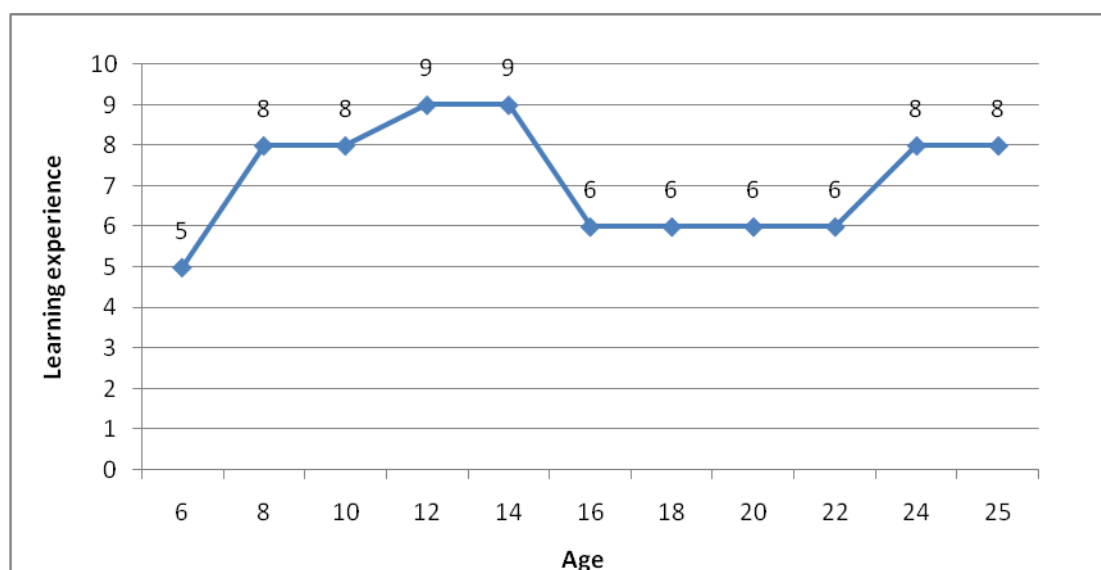


Figure 8.11: Alex's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 25

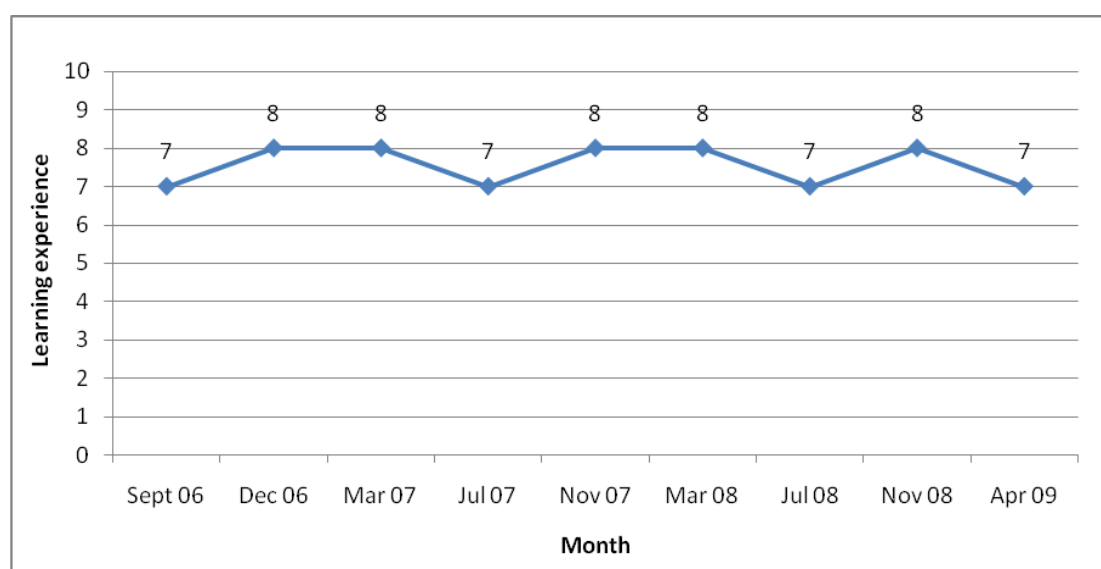


Figure 8.12: Alex's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2006 and April 2009

*My name is Alex. I come from China. My hometown is Anhui province which is located in the central eastern part of China. It is one the biggest provinces in China. From the beginning of 1990s, my family has lived in Shanghai. Shanghai is one of the municipalities in China, it is also the economic centre, the most fashionable and the most developed city in China.*

*There are five members in my family. I have two older sisters who were both married in the last few years. My mother is a housewife and she takes care of everything when we are at home. My father manages a small factory which is a mobile machinery shop.*

*My schooling was like most other students in China. There were no special things that happened in my schooling life. Whatever: I have a happy memory of my schooling when I was in China. Because I like sports and football is my favourite, when I was a pupil, I played football with my friend almost every day, and the same thing happened in my junior high school. I enjoyed these very much. How time flies, these things seem they happened just like yesterday.*

*I remember I met the English language for the first time when I was a grade three pupil. I did not think it was too difficult for me. Just one thing which I thought horrible was to remember too many words. Because I think I am a lazy boy, I never read books and remembered these words. But this was not the main problem for me to learn English. In the beginning of learning English, there was not too many things to do, our teacher gave us task to do every day and we just need to follow this step. That was all we did in the beginning of learning English. I began to feel English is a problem for me when I entered junior high school. We had to face grammar when we needed to express a complete sentence. Because English grammar is totally different from Chinese, if we consider writing a sentence or an article, we have to use different thoughts compared with Chinese. I believe this problem still is a big problem which Chinese students have to face now.*

*In 2006, when I got a college diploma my parents talked with me about my future, they hoped I could continue to study and the best was to get a master degree overseas. Actually this is my wish all the time, I think an English environment is my first choice if I consider studying overseas. As we know, English is a global language and it is used any time, any place. It also is important for us who need to improve knowledge of life. Especially for me, I am interested in business, English is more important for me if I do international business trade or work in an international company in the future. Luckily a friend of my parents lives in Liverpool in the UK, and then I got this chance to study in the UK. Liverpool Hope University is the first place where I study in the UK. This university is a very nice, quiet, and comfortable place. I have been in Liverpool for three years. I have studied foundation and level C of undergraduate studies in the last two years, now I am studying Level I of an undergraduate programme and it will finish in June 2010.*

*My subject is combined courses which are business and psychology. I mentioned above that I am interested in business trade, so I absolutely chose business course. The reason why I chose psychology is simple: psychology is a subject which I want to know some knowledge about. I felt that it is a totally different campus life in UK compared with China. In the last three years, I have learned a lot of study methods which are good for me to improve my study. Actually I really have understood what study is, how to study, when I should change study methods via this campus life. I will improve more in the next couple of years of study. Particularly I feel comfortable and enriched when I finish an assignment. Because I can learn lots of knowledge every time I complete an assignment.*

*During these years, I still would be confused if I have a report or project. Because this means I have to write many words and search a huge amount of information for these tasks. I am scared that I would make some grammar mistakes in the report and could not express my thinking entirely. Lucky there are some support departments in our university, such as the writing centre. This is a very good way to improve your writing skill, also it is a very important method for us Chinese students to improve our grammar. I also like to ask our tutor if I have some questions about the report; they also help me in a friendly way. About the life in Liverpool, I think it is a little bit difficult to talk with local people or some English*

*classmates, I do not know why. Probably I am not a good speaker or I cannot talk with them well. I just think they are not friendly sometimes. Maybe this is due to our different culture which I cannot understand well. But I believe that I will do it better in the future.*

*My aim is to get a master's degree, so it is clear that when I finish my undergraduate studies, I am going to choose a good university to complete my master's degree, probably in UK or other countries. I prefer to get a job abroad if I have enough ability. I think though there are many chances and opportunities in China, its environment is still not enough good for us. But if I have enough experience of work, I will choose to go back to China immediately. When all is said and done, China is my home country and my family is there. I want to do something for the development of my home country.*

*If I am asked to measure the quality of my learning experience in a range of 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest while 10 is the highest score), my answer is 5 which is a middle one. Though I have earned much experience of study, it is still not enough for me. Life is cruel, I need more knowledge to face various challenge in the future. I am a student and I am still learning.*

### **Ellie**

Ellie is a 23 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Language course. She came to the UK in September 2007, and she has been studying here for almost two years. Prior to that, she studied in a university in China for two years. Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with her current university. She is from a coastal metropolitan city in southern China. I got to know Ellie via a Chinese students gathering in 2007. Later, she kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited her to be a research subject.

Ellie's graphs of her learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of her learning experiences in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.13 and 8.14 respectively.

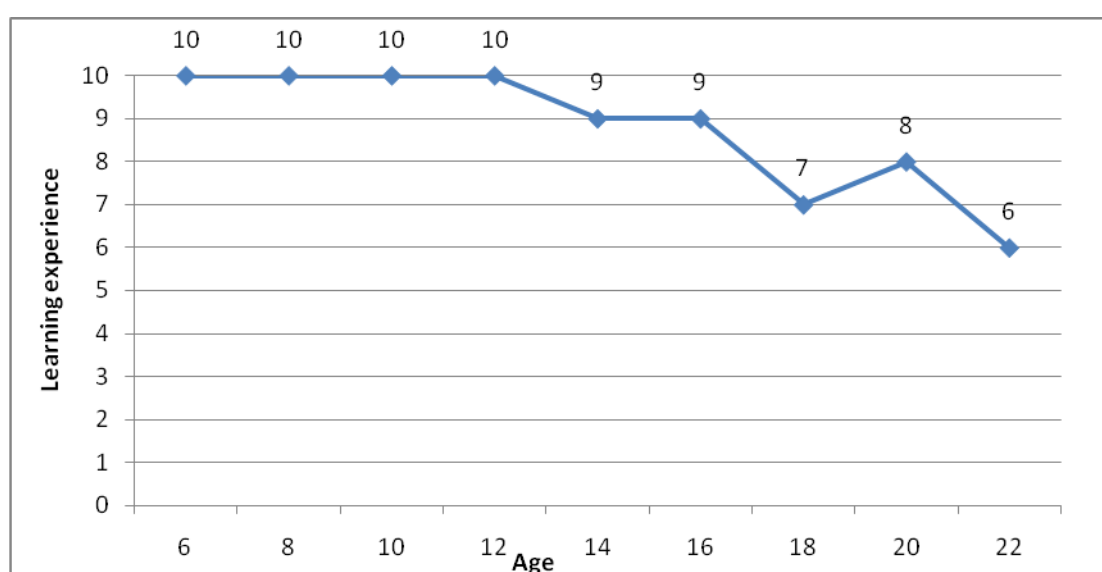


Figure 8.13: Ellie's perception of her own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 22

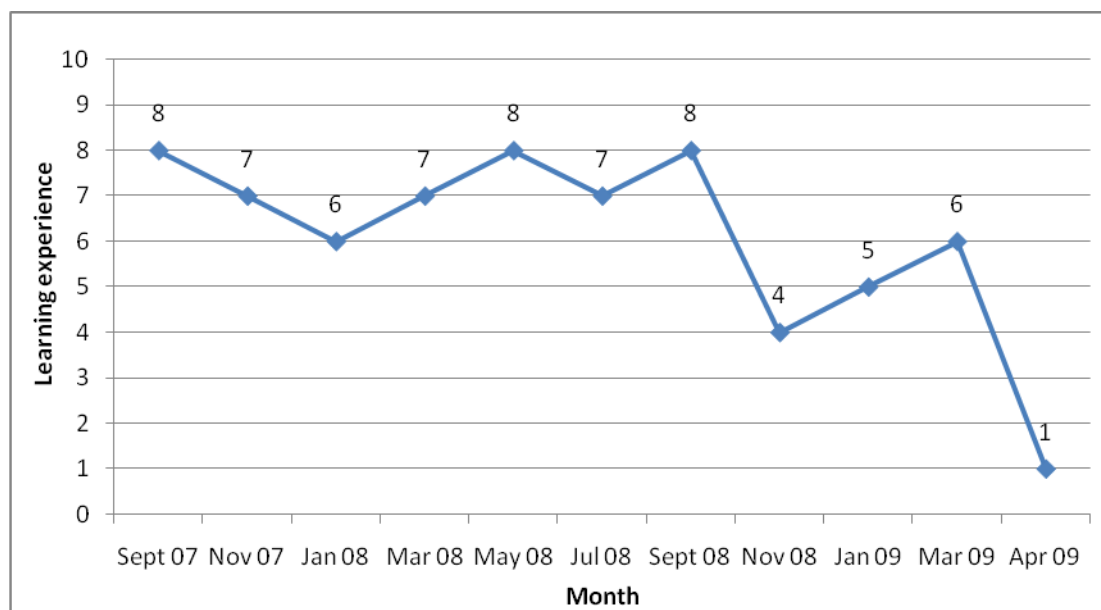


Figure 8.14: Ellie's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009

*Growing up in Shenzhen, a pioneer region of China's reform and opening-up policy, I have witnessed the tremendous leap in the economy and social life-styles. Multinational enterprises came in and brought with them new products, new language and a new life style, which interested me. My contact with English started at grade 4 at primary school. I was the student representative of English in our class, so I took an active part in English study and maintained strong incentives. Later, I went to a secondary school where English study was emphasised. There, I was carefully taught how to imitate American accents, interestingly, not the British one. I think the idea is to try to sound like native speakers with less Chinese accents. What they believe is that students will benefit life long if they can acquire the native-like accent from the very beginning. As far as I am concerned, language accents reveal people's cultural identity and it is very natural and beneficial to maintain one's inherent accent. Even though I can strive to imitate a British or American accent, I can never conceal or change my own identity as Chinese. To be fair, I benefited a lot from my English study at the secondary school. I was offered ample opportunities to practice my oral English and my scores in the English course remained high. Actually, when I took part in the entrance exam to university, I received an excellent mark in English. Thanks to English and, of course, my good marks in many other subjects, I was admitted to a reputable university in China. Interestingly enough, I majored in English.*

*In the Chinese university, I have always been enthusiastically involved in extra-curricular activities and voluntary work and thrived to be a well-rounded learner with creativity, social skills and a kind heart. I especially enjoyed participating in oral English competitions and English debates. But I was a bit lazy, unwilling to do grammar exercises as part of coursework, about which I actually regret now. At the same time, I was involved in sports activities organised by the Student Union.*

*Having majored in English at a Chinese university, I seized the opportunity to go on exchange to a British university. I personally experienced the different interpersonal communication and academic environments in China and Britain due to their different*



*cultures, economic and legal systems. For example, during a work shadowing event, I felt too humble to accept a cup of tea made by my British boss, who appreciated my performance as a voluntary administrator. That was because my Chinese culture expected me to remain modest and respect people of higher position, whereas my English boss believed that everyone deserved equal respect and needed to be valued. As a reflective learner, I understand very well how culture may strongly influence the way people do things. Coming to a British university, I was committed to maintaining academic excellence, and strove to adapt to the British education system. In a project of the operational management of Swatch, our group focused on the manufacturing process of the reduction of design complexity and the innovative production process. I enjoyed the research and was impressed at how innovation and technological expertise created core competence and values. I earned the reputation of 'theory master' among group members for my broad coverage of theories. I was proud of my contribution to the team cohesion. When one of our members failed to appear for regular group discussions twice, I phoned him personally to inform him of our progress and express my trust and expectation of him. When we finally finished the task together as a team, not solo, I really felt a strong sense of achievement. It was really great.*

*Apart from academic devotion, I also try to gain working experience. I volunteered to be a delegate helper for an on-campus congress and the duty includes word processing, organizing databases and registering delegates face to face. When delegates' flights had been delayed, I found that our warm welcomes and good services could actually bring smiles to tired delegates and I knew that my value as a volunteer was fully realised.*

*Most of the time, I hang out with Chinese peers who are also in the exchange programme, because they are not only companions fulfilling social needs but, indeed, great friends. When socialising with English people or other foreign friends I met here, I felt a strong involvement in the local community. We chatted and also went to pubs together. It is not my culture and kind of, against my family education to drink and stay out at night. But I found a way to enjoy it. I started to feel drunk even after one pint of beer and I can easily reach the 'merry' stage. My companions made fun of me, saying that I could have a very cheap night out.*

*All these activities that happened in U.K. triggered valuable learning moments. As a reflective learner, I have developed essential characteristics, such as a global outlook, intellectual confidence and independence and critical thinking. In terms of learning experience in the UK, I will give 8 out of 10 for the sake of personal development and academic development. I never regretted coming here and I can sense a big change in me during the two years away from home. At this stage of life I am eager for the acquisition of knowledge, and to set challenging goals for my future. I successfully applied for master study in UK. After the postgraduate study, I may seek one-or-two-year employment here, if circumstances allow. I am sure that I will eventually go back to China where my family is. After all, I am a big fan of family.*

### **Chris**

Chris is a 21 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Study course. He came to the UK in September 2008, and he has been studying here for almost one year. Prior to that, he studied in a university in China for two years. His Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China

plus 2 years in the UK) with his current university in the UK. He is from a coastal city in southern China. I got to know Chris via another participant in this study in February 2009.

Chris's graphs of his learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 21, and of his learning experiences in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.15 and 8.16 respectively.

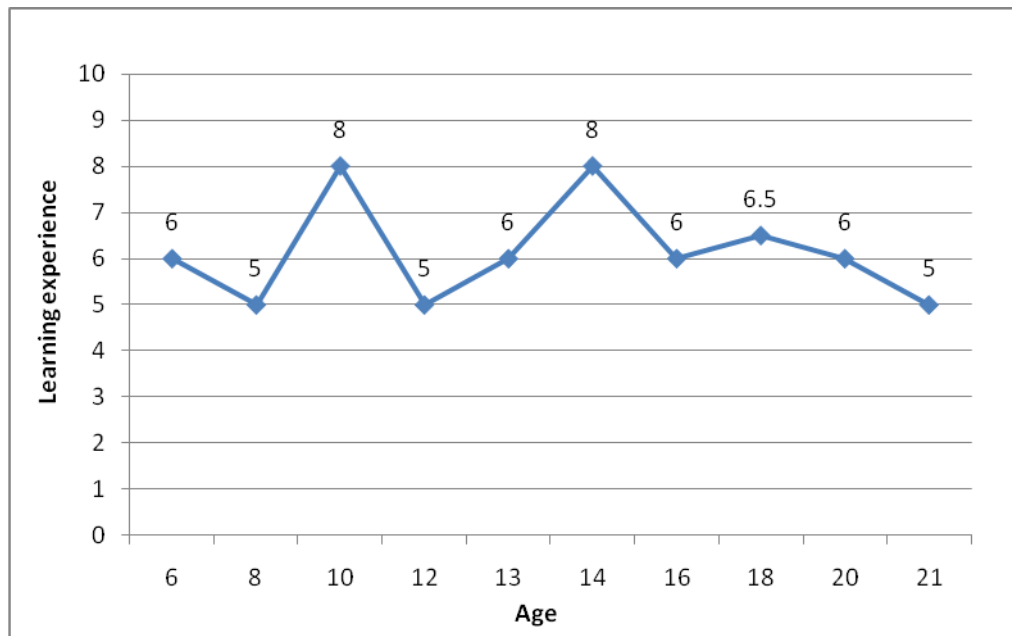


Figure 8.15: Chris's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 21

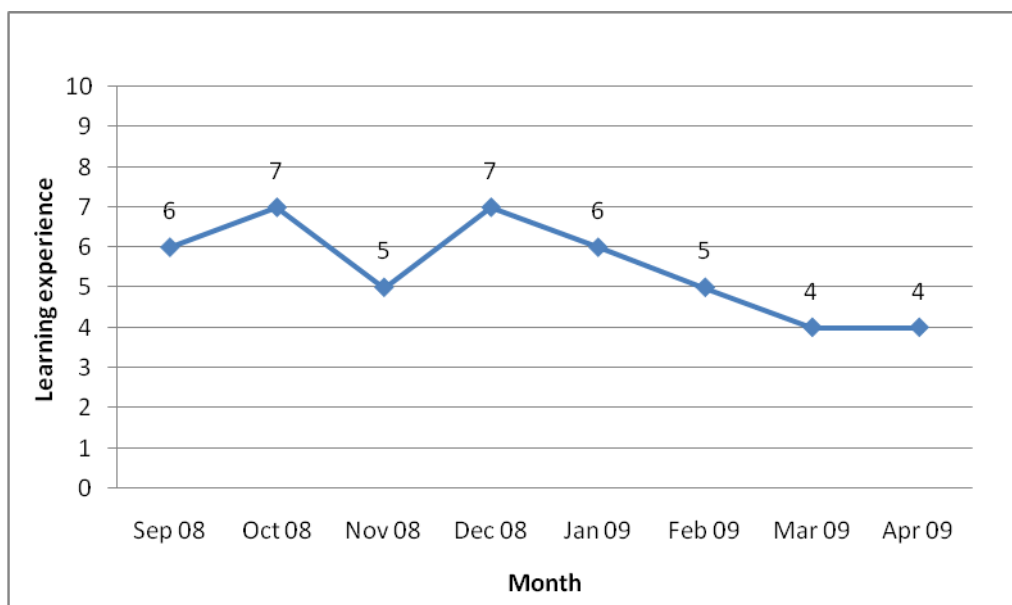


Figure 8.16: Chris's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2008 and April 2009

*I am from the city of Foshan in Guangdong Province of China. Talking about my home town, Foshan is usually related to and famous for its china industry. Foshan is one of the cities with the longest history and strongest background in this field in south China. But nowadays*

*the fame of Foshan's china industry is no longer a pride for the local government or the citizens, because the pollution of this industry has become a big issue that cannot be ignored. Moreover, traditional industries like china and the clothing industry are not welcomed any more due to its low economic benefits. As far as I know, the city government of Foshan has determined to move these traditional industries to other undeveloped cities and aimed to develop a series of new and modern industries, such as financial industry, E-commerce, and software industry and so on. But personally I doubt if it is practical for Foshan to set its goals in these fields. It seems to me that Foshan's ambitions, or the ambitions of the city government is not based on the facts and true situation of the city. It is more like a slogan that can also be heard from any other city nowadays in China. Hundreds of cities set their goals to become "International financial, economic and business centers". But I think most of these cities are too arrogant and will end up with a failure if they do not change their directions. As I understand it, the number of the cities today in the world that are recognized as a real 'international financial and business center' is no more than five. These are New York, London, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Shanghai. I do not think any of the cities those have set itself the goal of becoming a financial center can be a potential competitor of these five cities.*

*However, today I am not surprised any more when I heard more and more cities in China have set this kind of unpractical goals, just as I am not surprised with the phenomenon that among all the students studying abroad, the Chinese students are the highest proportion to pursue a degree in top business schools worldwide. Is that because the Chinese students are good at business? Is that because the fast growth of China's economy and the increasing opportunities in business today in China promote the confidence of these students? In my opinion, these are part of the reasons, but it is far from the truth. Some of these students do not even know what exactly a financial analyst does when they apply for an MS in Finance. Some of them have no idea in what kind of industry and company actuaries are needed when they accept the offer for this major in top business schools. Why? Personally I think the reason cannot be more similar to the case of the city of Foshan which I discussed above. Some of these students just follow the path that was set by their parents, just as the cities in China follow the order of the central government. Some of them are largely affected by their friends when they make their choices, just as Foshan follows the fashionable trend to develop modern industries as other cities do. Few students have analyzed themselves in terms of interest, weakness and ascendancy. Few students have questioned themselves if they really fit the major they are going to study. Few students think about the exact job these majors will lead them to and if it is their ideal job. Unfortunately, I used to be among these students I am now criticizing.*

*When I was 10 years old, a year before the middle school entrance exam, my father sent me to a foreign language school in Guangzhou, because the local middle school had a very bad reputation. Since then, I have never been able to get rid of learning language, mainly English. I studied in this school for 7 years, including the sixth grade in the primary school, three years in the middle school, and another three years in the high school. My experience in this school was not uncommon, compared to other teenagers of the same age as me. 'An average good student with a mature mind' is the comment of most my teachers. Partly because I talk little but often reveal an uncommon mind when writing a composition, partly because I started a relationship with a girl in the sixth grade in primary school. She became my girl friend and we are still in love. This is my school experience before stepping into the university.*

*In my opinion, the Chinese students would not get the choice to design their life until the university entrance examination. For the first time, they can decide what major they are going to study, which university they like and which city they want to stay in, at least in the following four years. However, I missed this chance. I got admission to SYSU without the university entrance examination, only by an election exam. I still remember the day I got the offer from SYSU. It was my 18th birthday. The major for me is translation and interpretation. I remember I have once considered whether I really liked this major. To be honest, I prefer science rather than arts, and I do not like learning language. But at last the will of studying in a top-10 university, or the reputation of SYSU conquered the wish to study what I really wanted. Actually it is me who abandoned the choice to design my own future. After a few days studying in SYSU, I found I could not stand it any longer. Not because I felt it hard to catch up with the others, but because I still kept in mind that this is not the exact major I wanted to study. For a time, I thought about dropping out of SYSU and applying for another university. At the moment I was preparing for the exam for another university, Liverpool Hope University came and promoted its programmes and I chose it.*

*I have spent almost a year here. I think I have got quite a lot out of being here, but which has nothing to do with the study. I have travelled around Britain. I have been to Scotland, York, the Lake District, Leicester and London. Actually I do not travel as my habit, but I do appreciate what I can get from travelling. I still remember I travelled to York just after a week I arrived here. It seems for me that travelling is a way for me to build up my confidence when I need it. By travelling around a new city, I can get the feeling that I can turn myself from a stranger into one familiar with this city. This gives me a sense of conquering and enhances my confidence.*

*The studying experience is the last thing I want to talk about. I do not think the learning and teaching here is very different from that in SYSU. Maybe it is because I have already lost the heart and passion to study. In the next five years, first of all I plan to go to the US for further education, mostly because my girlfriend is currently studying there. Otherwise I will hunt for a job after graduation from Liverpool Hope University. Hopefully I will run my own trading company in the future, because I do not think I can be a good member of staff in a big company. I like working for myself and working alone, just as I like travelling alone. Most interestingly, doing business in international trading once again indicates that I cannot get rid of English for quite a long period in the future.*

### **Kent**

Kent is a 22 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Language course. He came to the UK in September 2007, and he has been studying here for almost two years. Prior to that, he studied in a university in China for two years. His Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his current university. He is from a city in southern China. I got to know Kent via a Chinese students gathering in 2007. Later, he kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited him to be a research subject.

Kent's graphs of his learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of his learning experiences in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.17 and 8.18 respectively.

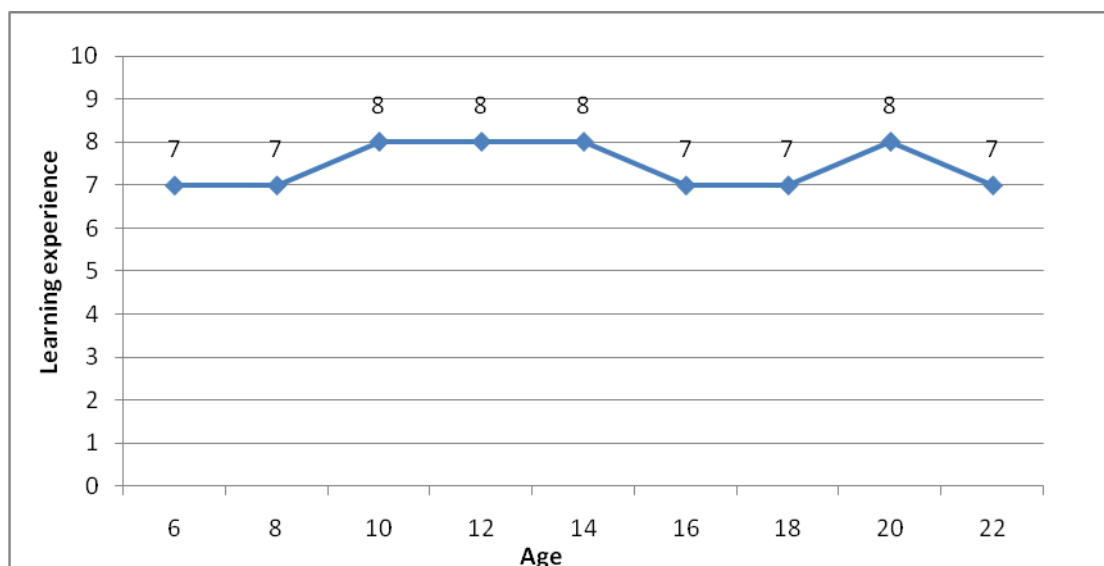


Figure 8.17: Kent's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 22

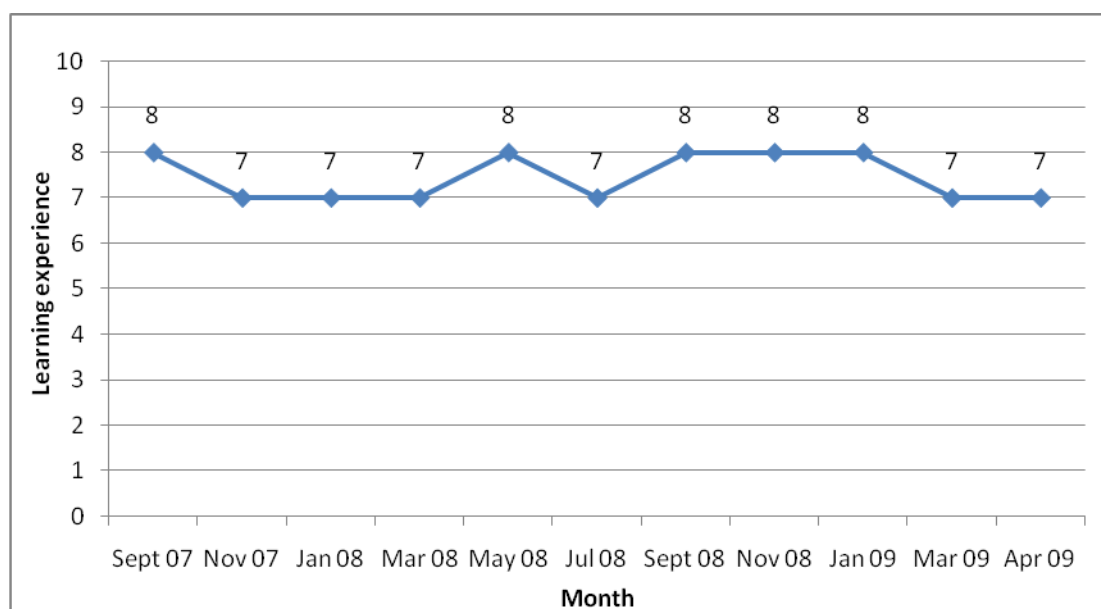


Figure 8.18: Kent's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009

*I'm Ken. I was born and brought up in Guangzhou, a large historical city that is often better known in the West as 'Canton'. It is located in the far southern coast of China, and has a population of nearly 10 million. As the capital city of the wealthy Guangdong province, Guangzhou has presently enjoyed a very high level of economic development.*

*There are three members in my family as I'm the only child. My parents are civil servants in provincial governmental departments. I was sent to a primary school at seven. I stayed there for six years before I progressed to a junior middle school. Three years later I did well in the local high school matriculating exam, and was admitted into Guang-Ya, one of the top ranking middle schools in the city. I studied there for three years before I attended the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in 2005 and was accepted by Sun Yat-sen University.*

*During my time at school, the days that I spent singing in the choruses (in my primary, junior as well as high school) were probably the happiest. I also did well in the subject of English and had very much enjoyed it, sometimes even more than any other subjects. My parents were very proud of me. Even though they did not have any knowledge of English to help me, I still did well in it. They trusted me in my progress and often sent me to weekend English schools where I had speaking sessions, often with native speakers from English-speaking countries. I enjoyed those days very much and did not see them as any extra academic pressure.*

*I started to learn English in Year 4 (Grade 4) of my primary school, when I was ten years old. I did not find it very easy to learn English at the beginning because its phonology is very different from that of Chinese, but my strong interest kept me motivated and did help me overcome some of the difficulties.*

*I can't really remember when it was that I started to consider studying abroad, but I always regarded it as one of my dreams. I was inspired by the story of Isaac Newton, and as a child, I did dream of going to Cambridge University some day, where Newton had studied and worked.*

*I came to study in the UK in 2007 when an exchange opportunity between Sun Yat-sen University and Liverpool Hope was made available to me. Now I have been studying in Liverpool Hope for two years. I do miss my parents and all of my friends in China from time to time, but I often remind myself that wherever I am, I have to work hard, be good and not let them down.*

*My course of study is BA Business and English Language. It is a very interesting combination of two different subjects. I chose it because of requirements from Sun Yat-sen University over my exchange programme.*

*I have been enjoying my study very much, and I have especially enjoyed the time that I have been in the Hope Park Voices Choir. Music is an important part of my life wherever I am and in whatever language. To me it's a language that communicates feelings more than any verbal language does.*

*Language and culture are the most challenging issues that I have to tackle while I'm studying as an international student. They are more challenging to me than the differences between learning in China and learning in the UK. To deal with these challenges, I have participated in all aspects of social life both in the university and in the city. I have also received great help from the University's support for international students, including the Writing Centre and career supports.*

*I intend to study a postgraduate course in Cardiff University after finishing my degree, but I can't really imagine in detail where I would be and what I would be doing in five years.*

*I would like to give a score of 7.5 out of 10 for the experience of my study in Liverpool Hope.*

*I'd also like to share the following story. In my high school, we used to study and mingle with students from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. They were mostly of Uyghur or Kazakhstani ethnicities. We had very happy memories knowing each other's cultures and*

languages. They had been chosen by the Chinese government as the best high school students in Xinjiang and were given the opportunity to study in high schools in several prosperous south-eastern cities. Being an international student in the UK I am able to imagine what kind of challenges those Xinjiang students must have faced when they had to study in a language and cultural setting so different from the one they were familiar with.

## Li

Li is a 22 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Language course. She came to the UK in September 2007, and she has been studying here for two years. Prior to that, she studied in a university in China for two years. Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with her current university. She is from a metropolitan city in southern China, which is next to Hong Kong. I got to know Li via a Chinese student gathering in 2007. Later, she kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited her to be a research subject.

Li's graphs of her learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of her learning experiences in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.19 and 8.20 respectively.

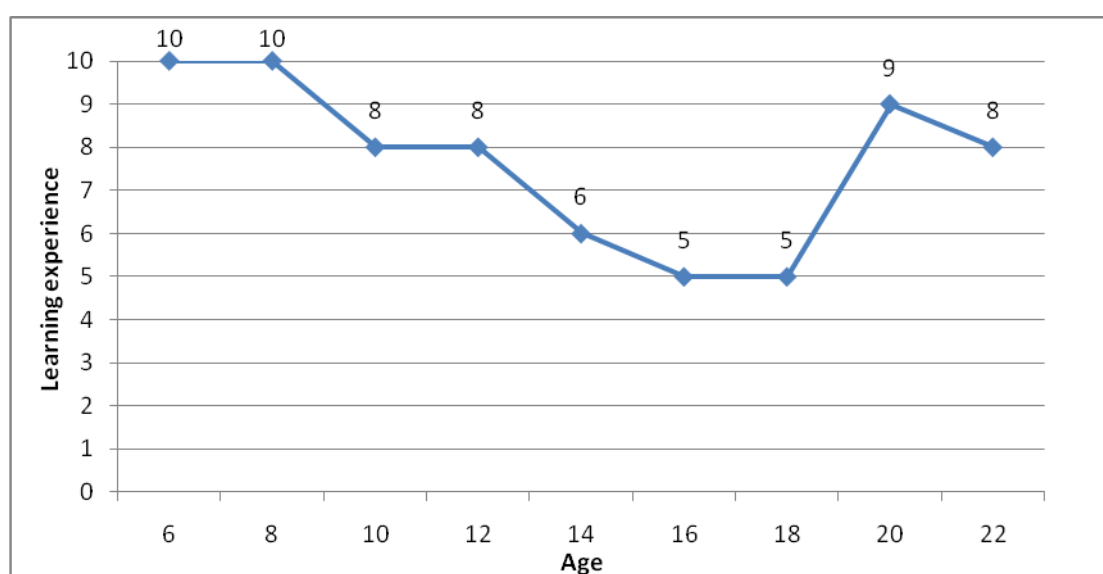


Figure 5.19: Li's perception of her own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 22

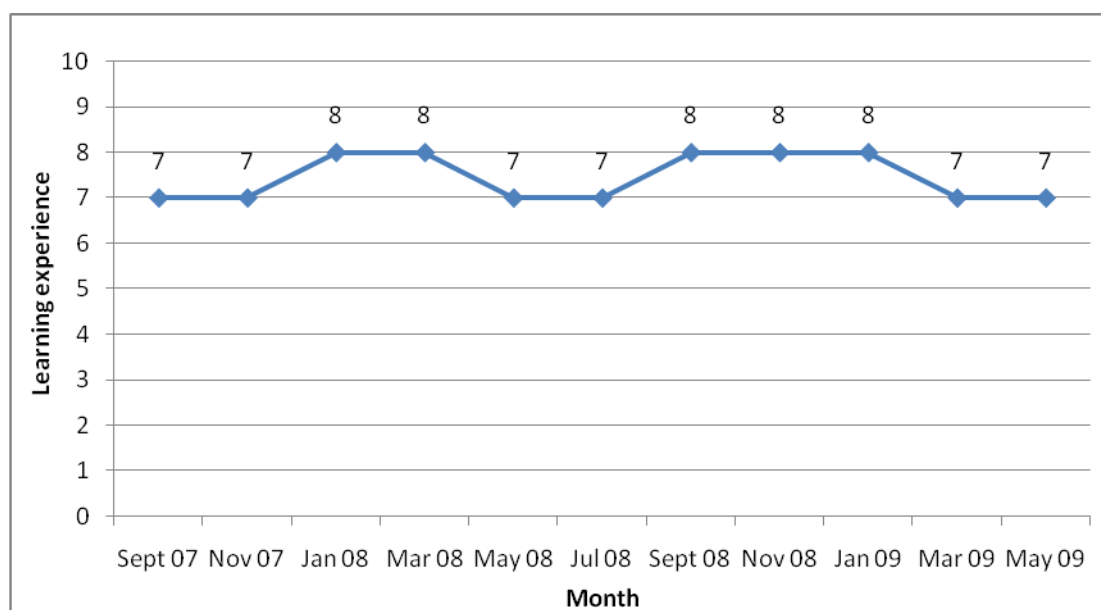


Figure 5.20: Li's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and May 2009

*I spent my entire childhood in Shenzhen until I was 18. Being the only child, I was used to intense attention. My parents were very strict with my study. Therefore my school experience was hardly happy. To some extent, it was truly painful. The pressure was already huge when I was in primary school, and the whole thing was almost unbearable when I went to High school. Competition was so fierce that I always felt frustrated and stressed. I remember that before the days of examinations, I could never sleep well. Some nights I was even unable to close my eyes. The fear of failure and disappointment hovered in my dreams most of the time. I entered the university in 2005. It was an important turning point of my life. Before that I was just a student, studying all the time. I did not know why I was studying and what I was studying for. The university experience opened my eyes to the world. It was the first time in my life that I was given the opportunity to pursue my real dream, to think about the meaning of life, and to live differently. It was fascinating.*

*My first experience of English learning started as early as the age of three or four. We repeated after the tape under the instructions of teachers but I could never remember any of it. Reading and writing started in fourth grade at about nine years old. Speaking and listening were difficult, because we had to tell the differences between pronunciations and try to memorize them. There were many sounds which did not exist in my knowledge of Chinese so I thought I must have been really confused at the beginning, but I cannot recall how I overcame the challenge. At the age of twelve I went to junior high school. Since then there was no real chance to speak English because it was not required in the English examination. So my ability in English speaking was mainly developed in primary school.*

*I decided to study in the UK in 2007, when I was 20. It was an exchange programme between my university in China and the university in England. I thought it was a good opportunity to broaden my horizon so I came. I was not at all confident with my English at the time but it was not until my arrival that I felt the shock. I do not know how to put my feeling. It was like what I had been studying for years was another language, and what I had known for years was another country. For the first few months, I could only grasp about fifty to seventy percent of the classes. There were so much cultural stuff that I did not know, so many accents that I was not familiar with, and so many new things that I needed to get used to. Even the*



*teaching styles were different. In China I was used to the teaching-and-listening kind of stuff. The process of studying was more like understanding and memorizing. But in the UK, it was a whole different story. There was no standard answer to a single question, so memorizing became useless. It was the skill to solve a given problem that mattered. Textbooks were not always right. Every question had its uniqueness which required careful study. The gap did not shrink easily, but I managed to deal with it at last. This was the common process our international students had to go through.*

*The most challenging thing during my study in the UK was academic writing. It was nothing near to my learning experience in China. For example, the writing requirements were different. In England I had to read a lot before I started an essay, which meant reading was the most important part in my learning. Tutors were tending to give me better grades when I read more. However, in China I could always start without much reading. I always felt that tutors were looking for critical thinking rather than evidence of in-depth reading.*

*I will start my MA study this year and I plan to work in the UK after that. Sometimes I have the feeling that because I am the only child, I bear more responsibility for my family. My Chinese values have a great influence on me in this part. It is not like my parents want me to stand out among my fellows. They have never said anything like that. But deep inside myself I strongly feel that I would love to repay my family by being a successful person. My parents have been the most important part of my life, and they always will be.*

*In a range of 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest while 10 is the highest score), I give 8 to my learning experience in the UK. I learned a lot, I met many great people, and I love Britain. By learning I do not mean the knowledge and skill I learned in my subjects, but rather the way of looking into life. Even though there are differences between politics, economy, geography, history, culture, religion, etc, it is the same when it comes to the meaning of life.*

*I think of myself as a Chinese student who has some leaning experience in Britain. I grew up in China, went to the UK at 20, and wanted to see where life could take me to. Chinese values are rooted in my bones and spirit, while the western values come and and are implanted in my soul. I am proud to say that I can take advantage of two very different cultures and make myself a better person.*

## **Jo**

Jo is a 23 years old female Chinese student. She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA English Language course. She came to the UK in September 2007, and she has been studying here for two years. Prior to that, she studied in a university in China for two years. Her Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with her current university. She is from a small city in southern China. I got to know Jo via a Chinese student gathering in 2007. Later, she kindly agreed to participate in the research when I invited her to be a research subject.

Jo's graphs of her learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of her learning experiences in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.21 and 8.22 respectively.

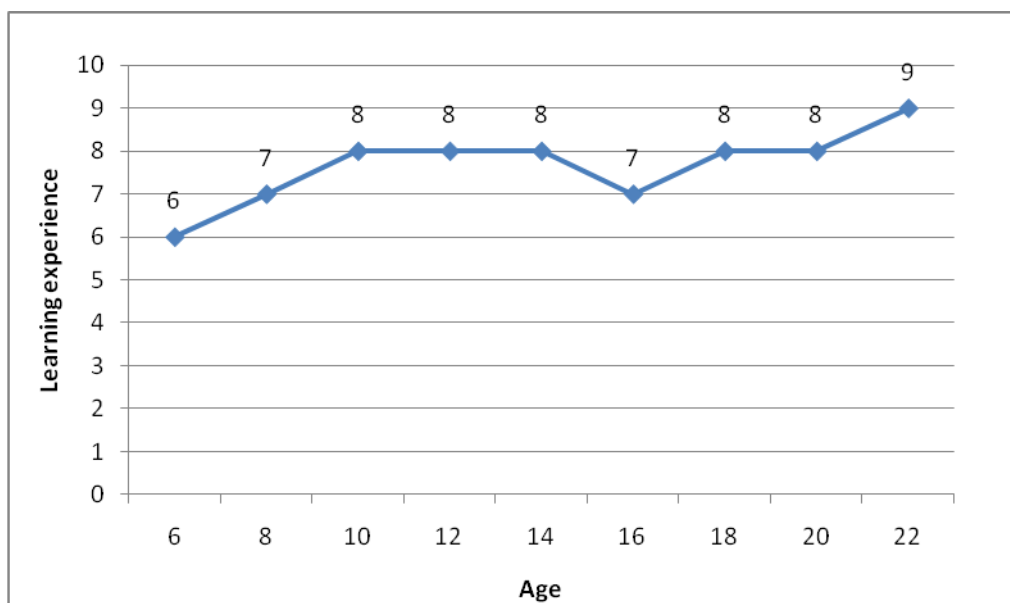


Figure 8.21: Jo's perception of her own learning experience between the ages of 6 and 22

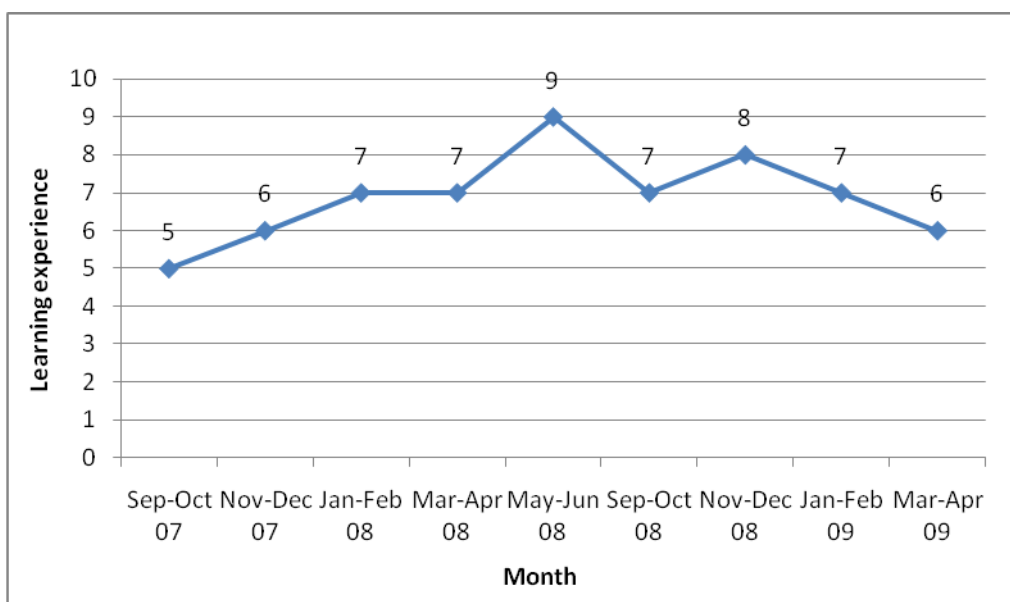


Figure 8.22: Jo's perception of her own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and May 2009

*I come from Guangdong, a southern province of China. My hometown is small both in size and population. It is very near the Pearl River. Many families have lived there for centuries. Most of the people make a living from farming and fishing. This is the place where I was born and grew up. I went to the local primary school, junior high school and high school rather than schools in the city which are considered to be much better. The local schools are smaller and have fewer students, because only the local people would send their children to those schools. In fact, if they have enough money, they will try every way to send their children to the schools in the city to receive a better education. In the local schools, the resources are very limited, especially teachers. My first English teacher in primary school was actually a Chinese teacher and at the very beginning of the class, he said, 'I don't know much English. Let's learn together.' The facilities were very simple. In my junior high school, there was only a weeded playground.*

*I have studied in UK for almost two years. The study life here in UK is not easy and there are always challenges. Especially in the first few months, I spent a lot of time getting used to a totally different life. The most challenging thing is the language. Before I came here I was quite confident of my English, because I had learned English for more than eight years. Besides, I did well in most of the English exams in school. Yet, after being here and surrounded by the language – English, I realized how poor my English was. It was very difficult to make myself understood. Poor pronunciation was one of the reasons; however, the most important reason was that according to my classmates, my English was outdated. Some usages rarely appeared in today's English, only being used in the old times. This fact reminds me of the English education in China. The resources we used in teaching hardly get updated. The same version of the textbook would have been used for years. That is why I was able to use my elder cousin's textbooks and did not need to buy new books. Moreover, the proficiency in English is measured by exams rather than the ability to use the language. The eight years I spent learning English have been wasted on taking exams, because I only focused on the things that could help me do better in exams, such as grammar practice. Therefore, I have never thought about how to use the language and had the feeling that exam is not the purpose of learning the language. Now after living in an English context, I find that 'you have never learned a language until you can use it in communication'.*

*Apart from the language problem, cultural difference is another challenging issue in my study, and is generally impossible to overcome in a short period. A lack of the basic cultural background makes it more difficult for me to understand the lesson. For example, in Stylistics class there are many cultural references such as a joke or some special connotations of words which confuse me a lot. The most difficult part is to do stylistic analysis in essays and tests.*

*Despite the difficulties mentioned above, I enjoy the study here very much. The teaching style is more relaxing. There are more interactions between the teachers and the students. Asking questions is encouraged any time in class. The relationship between the teachers and the students seems to be more equal. You can disagree with the teachers and even argue with them. They are willing to discuss different opinions rather than only give the "correct" answer. 'There is no correct answer' is what I have heard a lot. Besides, the classes are small and everyone can get a chance to speak. This is very different from the way we have classes in China. Our classes are big and the teachers are supposed to talk most of the time. The students hardly have chance to speak out their opinions. We get used to listening to the teachers and making notes. Even now I do not have much courage to speak in class but I have tried to push myself to join the discussion. I can see that I am making progress and feel freer to speak in front of the teacher and classmates.*

*It is nearly the end of my university life. Most of my friends are planning to continue their study but I will go back to China to find a job. Over eighteen years of study in school is quite enough for me now. Sometimes I feel that I have been cut off from society because of spending too much time in school. It is time to get back in step with society and get some social experience. For the past years to get a good mark in exams has been the goal that I worked hard on. Now I want to find a new and more meaningful purpose in life for myself.*

## Andy

Andy is a 23 years old male Chinese student. He is in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a BA Business and English Language course. He came to the UK in September 2007, and he has been studying for almost two years. Prior to that, he studied in a university in China for two years. His Chinese university has a '2+2' exchange undergraduate programme (2 years study in China plus 2 years in the UK) with his current university in the UK. He is from an inland metropolitan city in northern China. I got to know Andy via a student gathering in 2007 at Liverpool Hope University.

Andy's graphs of his learning experiences between the ages of 6 and 22, and of his learning experiences in the UK between September 2007 and April 2009 are shown in Figure 8.23 and 8.24 respectively.

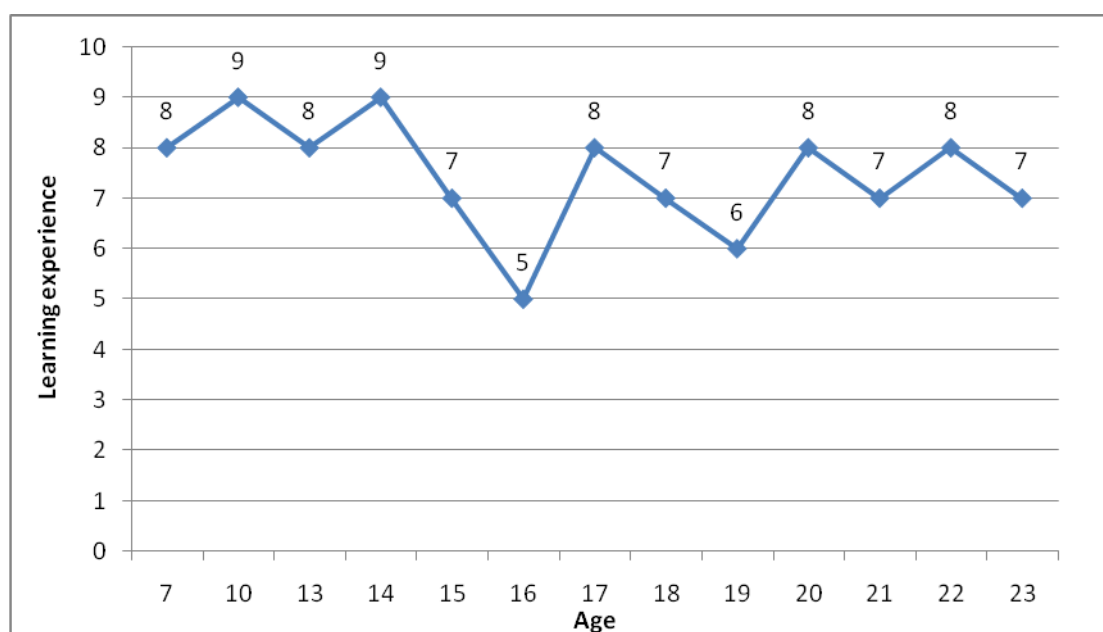


Figure 8.23: Andy's perception of his own learning experience between the ages of 8 and 23

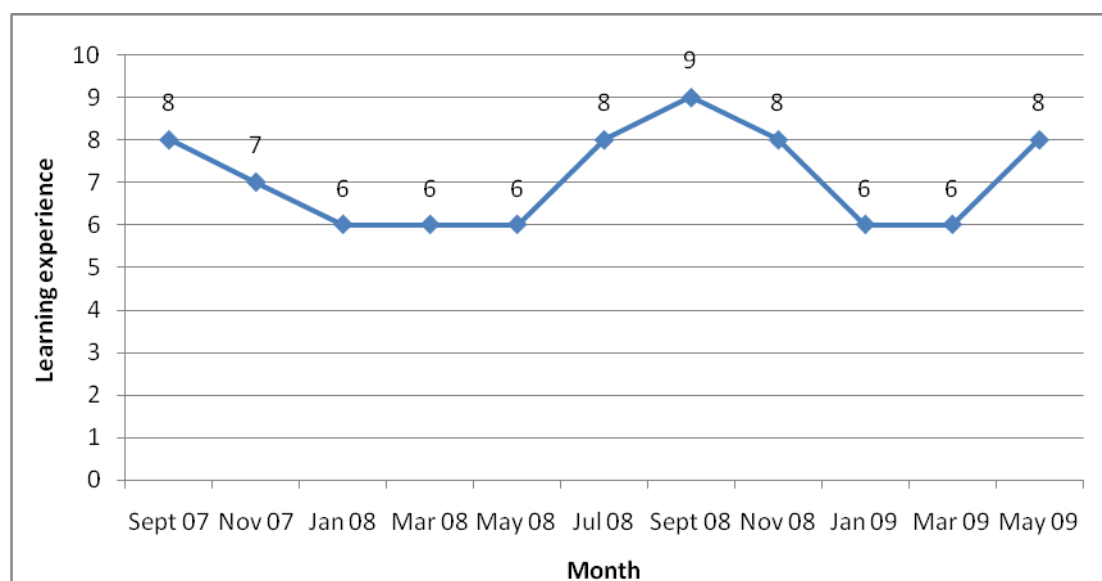


Figure 8.24: Andy's perception of his own learning experience in the UK between September 2007 and May 2009

*I was born in Wuhan, the capital city of the Hubei province. I cannot recall many things that happened in my childhood, however since I am able to remember and think about things around me, I find my life progresses in three-year cycles, after each cycle I will say goodbye to the old environment and step into a brand new uncertain area.*

*The first cycle occurred to me when I was in the middle school. My parents seemed to be dissatisfied with the teaching quality in my old school and they suddenly transferred me into another school. I already knew most students in my old school, since the old school is the official designated school of my primary school. In the new circumstances, I was frustrated by leaving some many friends but I gradually got used to the new environment.*

*Then three years later, when I was 17, a new cycle occurred. I moved to a small southern city, Zhu Hai, with my parents. Without any doubt, this time I had to learn to cope with a different culture, which is a great challenge to me. At first I could not understand what people around me were talking about. And I did miss my friends in Wuhan, so I often wrote to them and gave them a ring. However when I finished my first school year in Zhu Hai, I went back to Wuhan to celebrate the Chinese New Year and to meet my old friends. However I have to admit that there was a gap between us, for time seems to have changed many things. When they talked about their new experiences in school, I had a feeling of being an outsider and sometimes I could not get their jokes anymore. I did not feel frustrated, but I did feel loss. As the time went by, I made many friends in my high school, but most of them are from other provinces who shared a similar experience with me. Maybe that is the reason why I cannot speak Cantonese frequently even today. When I look back now, I really cherish my friendship with them.*

*Again three years later, I graduated from my high school and entered a top university in Guang Dong Province. At the beginning of this cycle, I became a university student. However the campus is next to my home. So I did not get excited at all and went back home maybe three or four times a week. Every time I feel bad that I chose to go home. So to some extent, the university life does not make me mature. From that moment on, I thought I would never be independent unless I left there. Then another two years had passed, my school suddenly announced that a 'two plus two' programme between my university and a university in Liverpool had been established. My first reaction was that I did not need this plan at all, because I can learn English very well in China. So I did not even tell my parents. One night when my father drove me home, I told my father there was such a programme and I did not want to go. My father told my mum, and my mum really fancied this program and urged me to sign up for it. So I talked to my classmates, and one of my best mates told me that he really wanted to go, but his family could not afford it. If my family could support me, I definitely needed to try. I reflected on his words and at last I thought I should go. Firstly, my major is English, there was a necessity to improve my English in an English speaking country. Secondly, my family is so close to my campus, I needed to be independent. Thirdly, I wished to look at the world outside China when I was young. And at last, I think Zhu Hai is not where I can go any further in terms of life experience. Then I left. A new cycle of my life began.*

*Everything was new and fresh after I arrived in Liverpool. Three things left a great impression on me. Firstly, the studying resources here are better than I thought and my*

*assignments are very difficult for me to cope with. English has become the teaching and learning medium and instead of dealing with exams, I am required to do essays of thousands of words. The second thing is my work. I get a taste of the society through working, which is a little bit tough. I got cursed by my manager for my low efficiency and other faults. But I had to swallow my sad feelings, because I need to be professional during my work. After working I realise that to read books is totally not enough to survive in the society. If I want to survive and do something, I need to be street smart. The third thing is my tour in Europe with two of my pals, which lasted for 33 days. We experienced quite a lot during the travel, sleeping in the airport, missing a flight, getting fined on a train and etc. Since then I realise life is really colourful and if I have a dream and go for it, I can accomplish it. It is not a matter of competence, but a matter of commitment to me and my dreams.*

*Now I think I am in a new starting point of another cycle of my life. I have been preparing to go to another unfamiliar environment. Currently I have got an offer from SOAS to study Chinese literature. Some people will regard it as a kind of funny to learn Chinese literature in Britain, but I have a different feeling and I think I need a brand new viewpoint towards the culture I was born in. And what's more, I have a very strong motivation to spread the Chinese culture around the world. Currently I am preparing for my essays and I am really enjoying it, since every day I can read different opinions by different authors. I believe my dream can lead me to anywhere that I want to go.*