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Perceptions of Chinese Top-Up Students Transitioning through a Regional UK University: A Longitudinal Study Using the U Curve Model

Xianghan O'Dea

Abstract—This article argues an urgent need to better understand the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students studying in the UK since the number of Chinese students taking year-long top-up programmes in the UK has risen rapidly in recent years. This lack of knowledge could potentially have implications for the reputation of some UK institutions and also the attractiveness of the UK higher education sector to future international students. This longitudinal study explored the academic and social experiences of 12 Chinese top-up students in a UK institution in-depth and revealed that the students felt their experiences were influenced significantly by their surrounding contexts at the macro and meso levels, which, however, have been largely overlooked in existing research. This article suggests the importance of improving the communications between the partner institutions in China and the UK, and also providing sufficient pre-departure and after arrival support to Chinese top-up students at the institutional level.

Keywords—Articulation agreements, Chinese top-up students, top-up programmes, U curve.

I. INTRODUCTION

INTERNATIONAL student transition is a popular research topic. Traditionally research in this area tends to consider Chinese students as a single category, regardless of the study abroad route, and the type of programme they study in Britain. Chinese top-up students however are different from other international students, and almost certainly encounter a much steeper learning curve and more personal challenges, mainly because the duration of a top-up programme is 12 months. Consequently, their personal experiences may change significantly through this one-year study. In addition, research in this area largely focuses on the first-year, or transition into the UK higher education experience of international students [1]. The transitioning through experiences of Chinese top-up students during their studies, including their transition patterns, however remain under-researched. Furthermore, most research to date has mainly explored the post-arrival institutional level support to international students. There has been very little attention devoted to pre-departure academic and social support and its impact on top-up students' adjustment [2], [3]. Nevertheless, it is suggested that it is important to provide such help to Chinese top-up students, because they are expected adjust to the new surroundings quickly, and more importantly to improve their academic skills significantly in a very short period of time. In addition, research shows that international

students embarking on a short-term study abroad journey tend to feel more anxious before leaving their home country [4]. This lack of knowledge and understanding about the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students makes it more challenging for the UK institutions to provide the most appropriate pre-departure and after arrival support, and subsequently the seamlessly connected studying and social experiences to these students. This could potentially have a notable impact on the reputation of some UK institutions, and also the institutional collaborations between China and the UK in the future, as those Chinese students who have had unpleasant experiences and gained unsatisfactory results are unlikely to praise the receiving institution they studied at.

This article draws on a longitudinal study exploring the personal experiences of 12 Chinese top-up students in a UK institution in depth. Data were collected through three sets of semi-structured interviews during 2015. The findings suggested that this one-year study was a very difficult journey to this group of Chinese top-up students, and the transition experiences of most of them only partially followed the U curve model. The study makes a contribution to both the international student transition and the U curve literature by showing that the transition experiences of international students, especially those on short-term programmes are greatly affected by their surrounding contexts at the macro (national) and meso (institutional) levels, in addition to those at the micro (personal) level. Additionally, this article helps inform policy making regarding cross-country articulation agreements, and also provides recommendations in relation to learning and teaching practise, and international student support to UK institutions that are wishing to establish new articulation partnerships, or to strengthen their existing partnerships with the Chinese institutions.

The perceptions in this study refer to the thoughts, views and feelings of Chinese top-up students. The term “transitioning through” refers to the entirety of the process of Chinese top-up students moving from the beginning to the end of their top-up programme.

II. ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS AND TOP-UP PROGRAMMES

Articulation agreements between Chinese and UK institutions have grown fast over the last few years, and have become an important part of higher education

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internationalization in both countries [5]. This type of transnational partnerships allows Chinese students to transfer the academic credits earned in their home institution in China, normally through a SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority) HND (Higher National Diploma) or an equivalent three-year international programme, and top them up to gain a bachelor's degree in a partner institution in the UK [6]. The programmes that Chinese students study in the UK are normally called top-up programmes, which are equivalent to the final year of an undergraduate programme [7]. Between 2013-14 there were more Chinese students coming to study in the UK (4.1%) via articulation agreements than by other entry routes (3.5%) [8]. In 2019, over half of the universities and Further Education (FE) colleges in England (149 out of 280) were offering a total of 997 top-up programmes to students, in particular, to international students [9]. However, it is worth noting that articulation agreements differ from other transnational partnerships, such as joint programmes in that they do not need to be approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE). Therefore, any Chinese institutions or colleges can run articulation programmes, and recruit whoever wants to study abroad, as long as these students are able to pay the fees, which are normally much more expensive than the state university degrees. In addition, the UK partner institutions do not tend to contribute to the teaching, and curricula design of the programmes delivered in China, which are responsible solely by their Chinese partner institutions [10]. Consequently, articulation agreements are considered merely as an international student recruitment tool, and the authorities have even stopped providing the latest data in this area, in spite of the increased popularity of top-up programmes in the UK.

III. FEATURES OF CHINESE TOP-UP STUDENTS

Current research suggests that Chinese top-up students share some similarities with home top-up students. Academically, home top-up students find it very challenging to cope with the more advanced level of academic study, partially due to some major differences between a further education (FE) college and university, such as learning and teaching style, tutor support, and academic assessments. In addition, home top-up students often lack the ability to sustain themselves in this more demanding environment, in terms of time management, learning independently and handling pressure. Some home top-up students also have part time jobs, and find it hard to keep a study-work balance, because of the increased pressure of degree level study. Furthermore, many home top-up students feel that it is tricky for them to bond with the existing student population, which is normally much bigger and more diverse than the college from which they originated [7]. In addition, Chinese top-up students experience the following challenges, which are unique to this particular group of international students. For example, they only have a very short period of time to adjust to the new academic and living environment, and to get used to a new culture and new language simultaneously. In spite of the fact that many of them have gained a SQA HND qualification in China, and its teaching and assessment claims to be more student centred, there is not much evidence to prove that this

learning experience has helped these top-up students settle in the new learning environment more effectively [11].

IV. THE U CURVE MODEL: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The U curve model was proposed initially by [12] and was expanded later by [13]. It describes a cross-cultural transition as a four-stage process: the honeymoon, the crisis, the recovery, and the readjustment (Fig. 1).

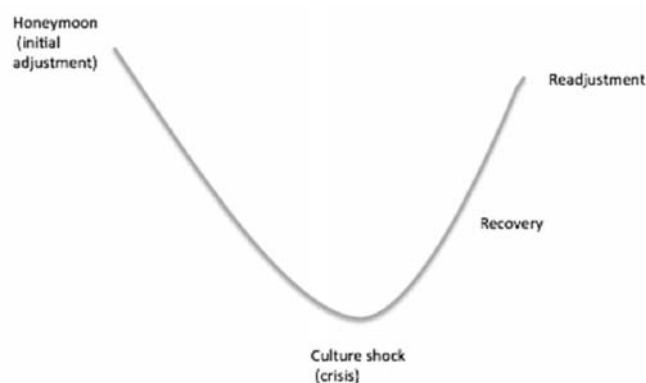


Fig. 1 The U curve model, as represented by the author

At the honeymoon stage, individuals are full of enthusiasm and are fascinated about the new culture and environment. However, once they start to cope with the real situation on a daily basis, the second stage, culture shock or crisis begins. Because the differences between the home and new culture and new environment begin to affect their everyday life, these individuals start feeling lonely, anxious and isolated. After living in the new environment for a period of time, individuals move onto the recovery stage, as they develop a better understanding of the host culture, and the new community starts to feel more like home. At the final re-adjustment stage, individuals are truly settled in the new environment and are able to function effectively in the new culture.

The U curve model is chosen for this study, mainly because it encompasses all three perspectives of cross-cultural adjustment as identified in existing literature (stress and coping, culture learning and social identification), and almost all other transition models seem to focus on only one perspective. The stress and coping perspective are mainly concerned with the negative side of cross-cultural transition, such as the problems and difficulties individuals experience [14]. The culture learning perspective focuses on training individuals to develop the necessary cross-cultural knowledge and skills, such as language competency, the ability to develop new cross-cultural friendships, and cultural awareness [26]. The social identification perspective investigates how individuals relate to their own ethnic group (in-groups) and other ethnic groups (out-groups) in the new cultural environment [15]. In addition, the U curve model focuses on exploring the *transition through* experiences of individuals, and provides a good description of a possible transition process that individuals may experience when they go through their cross-cultural transition. Furthermore, the U curve model addresses both the academic

and social transitions of individuals, and Lysgaard also remarked that both transitions were connected closely to each other, that is, a successful transition in one aspect (academic or social) could have a positive impact on the other aspect. In contrast, other transition models have largely overlooked the academic adjustment, and instead, have emphasized mainly the psychological and social adjustment of individuals [16], [17].

To date, the U curve model has received a number of criticisms and the main ones may be summarized in the following. First, the U curve model suggests that the transition process of individuals should be monitored over time. However, the research Lysgaard conducted was only cross-sectional in nature [18], [19]. Second, the U curve model fails to address whether and how some factors, such as individual differences and the surrounding contexts affect individuals' cross-cultural transitions. Third, the linear structure of the U curve model may be too rigid, as individuals may not go through all stages or experience them in the same order [20]. And finally, there are a number of areas that lack a clear explanation, and hence, the trustworthiness of his research is weakened. For instance, Lysgaard did not explain why those who studied in the U.S. between six to 18 months experienced more transition issues, and also how and why individuals move from one stage to another [14], [20].

When adopting the U curve model, this study used a number of methods to counteract the criticisms mentioned above. To begin, this study was longitudinal in nature, and collected both longitudinal and cross-sectional data. It also adopted the portrait methodology, since its focus is specifically on individuals, their differences and their contexts. In addition, during the data collection stage, this study explored all related factors that might affect the transition and personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students. Moreover, in order to overcome the criticisms that the U curve model is a rigid linear transition model, and lacks a clear explanation in many areas, this study set out to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese top-up students' personal experiences through exploring their feelings and opinions repeatedly at the key stages of this one-year programme (moving in, moving through and moving out), rather than to use any stereotypes. Attention was paid specifically to investigate how and why the participants progressed from one transition stage to another, and how long they stayed in each transition stage. As a consequence, this study is able to explain to the reader whether and to what extent the transitions of this group of Chinese top-up students followed the U curve model, and the key factors that contributed to or affected their transition process.

V.METHODOLOGY

This study adopted portrait methodology to explore the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students in depth. Portrait methodology is a type of qualitative research methodology, and its main purpose is to represent the personal stories of the research subjects through the production of written portraits (or the researcher's interpretations), and then getting their reactions to these interpretations [21]-[23]. Portraits therefore are one the key features of portrait

methodology, and are developed from the data collected. Additionally, when using portrait methodology, data are collected via semi-structured interviews only, since the research focus is not on gaining some external truth, but on understanding "the thoughts, feelings and self-reflections of individuals in particular contexts at a moment in time" [22], [23].

Portrait methodology was felt to be most appropriate for this study mainly because the research intention was to explore the perceived views of Chinese top-up students during the period of time when they were studying a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. Since the data were collected only through semi-structured interviews, it is highly important for this study to demonstrate that it has achieved trustworthiness, in particular, the researcher needs to show to the reader that what the participants said in the interviews was what they believed to be true to themselves at the time. In order to do so, the researcher used several strategies to build and maintain trust with the participants during the research process. For instance, this study did not request signed informed consents from the participants. Instead, they were given a trust document, which was written in Chinese and English. As with an informed consent form, this document included the basic ethical rules and the meanings of voluntary participation within the context of this particular research. Nevertheless, this trust document was signed by the researcher. In doing so, the participants were assured that they were not required to fulfil any particular expectations in this research. In addition, it helped build an equal research relationship and reduce the participants' anxiety and pressure [24]. The trust document, as a result, was accepted as a justifiable alternative to the informed consent form to generate the high level of trust this study aimed for, since asking the participants to provide signed informed consent forms would affect the relationships the researcher was trying to build with the participants. In addition, the participants were provided with the interview questions in advance of their interview; in this way, the researcher demonstrated to the participants that no questions would come as a surprise, and she had nothing to hide. The researcher also wanted to show the participants that they were trusted to not invent truths in the interviews, since they had already seen the questions. The participants were also granted full control over the data collected and their portraits, as the portraits were sent back to the participants for comments and feedback, which allowed them to change or delete any content as required. Furthermore, the researcher used WeChat, a Chinese social media platform to maintain regular contact with the participants throughout the research process, as there was on average a three-month or four-month gap between the interviews. The regular communications via WeChat seemed to have worked effectively. The participants appeared to appreciate the fact that the researcher was genuinely interested in their personal experiences and well-being, and did not use them for exploitative purposes.

Data collection took place three times in 2015 and 12 participants who studied a top-up programme in the UK institution between 2015-16 participated in the research. They were selected using a combination of convenience, snowball

and opportunity sampling strategies. The sample population was felt conveniently accessible because the researcher and the Chinese top-up students were from the same academic school. Since the researcher did not know any of the Chinese top-up students in this particular cohort (2015-16) beforehand, the first few participants were recruited or recommended by Chinese top-up students from the previous cohort. They then helped recruit the rest of the participants. The researcher also used opportunity sampling technique because the Chinese top-up students arrived at this UK institution at different times in summer 2015, since they had to study a pre-session language course prior to the start of their top-up programme, and the duration of their pre-session courses varied from 15 weeks to five weeks. Before coming to Britain, six participants studied an HND programme, and the other six studied an international programme in China.

The first set of interviews was conducted at the moving in stage, which refers to their pre-departure and post arrival period. The second set took place at the moving through stage, which includes the period between the start of their top-up programme to the end of their first semester. And the final set was carried out at the moving out stage, which includes the period between the start of their second semester to the end of their top-up programme. Each interview was around one and a half hours in duration and took place at a location where the participants felt most comfortable. Since the researcher and the participants were all native Chinese, all interviews were conducted in Chinese. In doing so, the researcher intended to create a relaxing atmosphere for the participants, as they could easily express what they wanted to say. At the start of the interviews, the participants were provided with a brief explanation of the research, also their rights and responsibilities as research participants. Permission was also asked and granted each time to allow the researcher to record the interview with a digital voice recorder. After each interview, written portraits were produced for the participants, and were subsequently sent back to the participants for comments and feedback. Amendments were thus made to them accordingly, when it was necessary. Data were then analysed and interpreted through the first cycle and second cycle coding, and themes were generated in each transition stage, which were used to gain an understanding of the main story that the data were trying to show across the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. The related details are presented in the findings section.

This study fulfilled the requirements of and followed the guidelines set by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the research committee. As the participants of this research were from an academic school, at an institution in Northern England, an ethical application form was also submitted to and subsequently approved by the research committee in the academic institution.

VI. THE FINDINGS

The data collected suggest that this one-year study abroad journey appeared to be very challenging to this group of Chinese top-up students, and their perceptions changed while they went through the moving in, moving through and moving

out stages. In addition, most students in this group seemed to have experienced only some of the transition stages, as described in the U curve model.

A. The Problems and Challenges the Chinese Top-Up Students Experienced

The personal level problems and challenges that had emerged from the data, such as language deficiency, a lack of sufficient academic skills, and social interaction barriers, seemed to support what has been identified in current literature [1]. It is however worth pointing out that even though most new year-one undergraduate students, including the home and international students, also feel overwhelmed with university academic work and social commitments, they have a much longer time to settle in the new environment than the Chinese top-up students (one year vs. three years).

To meet the requirements and expectations of the final year, also the most advanced year in an undergraduate study in the UK, the participants felt that they were given little time to adjust and settle in to their new environment properly.

Many of us are feeling the same: it is very difficult [in this one-year] to make a significant improvement, in particular in relation to the language skills. [There are benefits] as I get to see the outside world. However, I think one needs to stay here for at least three to four years if one wants to truly improve the language skills. (Laura)

This consequently seemed to have had a major impact on their academic performance and achievements. For example, almost all participants said that they were struggling with academic writing, and getting overwhelmed by the academic pressure, in particular the intensity of assignments, and the high expectations regarding assignment quality.

I felt that all I did in the second half of the first semester was working on my assignments [...] we practically had to write one assignment on a weekly basis, since many of them needed to be handed in before the end of December. (Laura)

The situation they were in seemed to be caused mainly by the fact that they felt they were not provided with the appropriate or sufficient training and support before their departure. For example, half of the participants who studied an international programme said that they did not receive any training regarding academic writing in their home institution in China. Even though the other six who studied a HND programme did, it appeared that there were many differences between their home institution and the UK institution in the areas such as tutoring expectations, academic referencing, and the level of support provided.

I knew we would need to write assignments in the near future in Britain. I didn't make any preparations for it when I was in China because I never wrote one, hence, never really thought about it. (Alex, international programme)

The websites we used were all in Chinese... In order to write the assignments, one needed to have some ideas first and follow his ideas to write. We copied most of the content off the Internet. (Alan, HND)

Many participants also reported that they found it uncomfortable and difficult to manage their own learning, even though they realised that they were expected to do so inside and outside the classroom. The comments of the participants indicate that this was mainly because there was a lack of adequate institutional level support, as the participants said that they were only familiar with teacher-centred teaching approaches, which did not encourage or prepare them to learn independently.

I am so used to being spoon-fed. But suddenly the British way of teaching gives me so much freedom, which I don't really know how to handle. I think I might study better if tutors were taking more control and forcing me to study. (Alan)

We are given too much freedom and autonomy, which I don't really like. We are left to make decisions for many things and do whatever we like. It actually feels like nobody really cares about and looks after us. (Michelle)

Socially, the participants reported that few of them managed to make British friends in the year.

I have no British friends in my social life. I hardly need to speak English. This is no good. (Jane)

I rarely have any social contacts with British people, and have no British friends at all. (Rachel)

As with their academic development, almost all participants felt that the UK institution offered limited opportunities and support to help the Chinese top-up students get to know other students of different cultural backgrounds.

I am always in a group with other Chinese students when having group discussions. Our module tutors don't seem to care who we are within a group, or whether we speak to each other in Chinese or English. (Michelle)

In this situation, the participants seemed to retreat and opt for an easier alternative; that is, socializing mainly with fellow Chinese top-up students. Consequently, these students said that they were unable to integrate into the local community, and lost opportunities to learn the new local culture properly.

I think I know some basic differences between the two cultures, but I don't really know the British culture, because I have hardly had any contacts with the local people. But this doesn't bother me. To me, it is not a big deal whether I get to know the local culture. (Sophie)

B. The Transition Patterns of the Chinese Top-Up Students

1) Following the U Curve Model Partially

The participants reported that the transition patterns of most of them (11 out of 12) were very similar and followed the U curve model partially. In other words, they went through the first three stages in the order described by the U curve model, namely the honeymoon, the crisis and the recovery. As soon as they arrived in Britain, these participants said that they started experiencing the honeymoon stage, as this was the first time that they had come to Britain or Europe. They appeared to be full of excitement and had a great first impression of the country and the host country nationals. Because everything was new and different from what they had experienced in China, these participants reported that they were curious, and were very keen

to explore the host city and the surrounding areas.

We shopped around the city as soon as we arrived... We have already been to the cities near us. Me and my friends are planning to go to London this weekend. I can't wait. (Michelle)

When I first arrived in Britain, everything was feeling great, and I had a really good mood. I said to myself, 'I am finally here!'. (Amanda)

At the moving through stage, all participants were at the first semester of their top-up programme. Those mentioned above reported that they progressed from the honeymoon to the crisis stage. At the time, some of them said that they were feeling depressed and overtired; some said that they were feeling disappointed and unmotivated; some said that they were feeling homesick and others appeared to be feeling a combination of these.

My crisis period started in October. This is because on the one hand, I gradually became familiar with the environment and began to know many things. And suddenly I felt that I wasn't feeling as excited as I was when I first arrived in Britain. On the other hand, I started missing home, since I had been in the UK for several months. At the time, I think I was quite emotional. (David)

In addition to the academic pressure they experienced, as discussed above, it seemed that the cultural differences and language barriers started to have more impact on their daily life after the initial excitement started to disappear. This subsequently affected their mood and their views about this study abroad journey.

British people must really like drinking. It seems that in the evening they all like to go to pubs to drink. Their nightlife is quite boring, because this is mainly what they do in the evening. (Sophie)

Between the end of their first semester and the start of their second semester, these participants reported that they moved onto the recovery stage almost at the same pace. This might be because they felt that they had developed some understanding of their top-up programme and the new environment through their experience in the first semester. Even though they experienced the assessment season again towards the end of their second semester, these participants commented that they knew what to expect and also became better at coping with it.

I was feeling really stressed in November last year, because we had so many assignments to complete, and I didn't know what to write. But now I am certainly feeling better now, as I know the situation I am in better than before. (Alex)

However, none of these 10 participants seemed to have experienced the readjustment stage, the final transition stage proposed by the U curve, as they said that they did not manage to develop a full understanding of the UK higher education system, and also the ability and skills to truly integrate in the new social environment. As a consequence, this situation has appeared to have affected their personal development, since the participants reported that they were unable to fully take advantage of this study abroad opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills they planned to, and the ability to live

happily and comfortably in a different culture.

I know I didn't manage to settle in properly in the UK. ...I feel I am more like somebody who is just passing through the country. (Harry)

I think I have no problem living in Britain, however, I think one year isn't enough for me to truly understand [many important aspects of Britain], such as the local society, the people, and the job market. (David)

2) Not Following the U Curve Model at All

In contrast to the other 11 participants, data suggested that the transition of one participant did not follow the U curve model at all. Daniel believed that his transition in this year was "more like a straight line". He said that he did not experience any of the transition stages of the U curve model, as there were hardly any ups and downs when he progressed from the moving in to the moving out stage. For example, he remarked, "when I first arrived, I didn't feel overly excited like my friends. Everything was feeling quite normal and natural... I didn't miss home, and wasn't feeling depressed when dealing with my assignments". His portrait suggests two reasons for his reaction. Firstly, it might be related to his personal characteristics. Daniel appeared to be a calm and relaxed person. He said that he did not tend to worry or feel depressed about things. And secondly, it might be related to his previous experiences in China.

This is not the first time that I live away from home. My parents and myself are all used to it. Even when I was studying in my home institution in China, I only went home twice each year.

Since only one participant showed a significantly different transition pattern from the others, further research needs to be conducted to explore the impact of certain personal differences, such as personal characteristics and previous life and study experience on the individuals' transition, especially those on short-term programmes.

VII. DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, the findings of this study showed that the Chinese top-up students experienced numerous difficulties and problems academically and socially throughout their journey, and were unable to manage the academic and social situations they were in. If the statements of the participants are true, there are additional questions and concerns emerging in relation to the top-up degrees offered at this UK institution. For example, *is this top-up degree fit for purpose? Is the UK institution asking too much of students who come from a very different social and academic culture and aren't very academically gifted to transform from a novice to expert of British academic and social culture in just one-year?* Also, *should British higher education institutions expect international students with such backgrounds to deal with and manage their academic and social situation in just one-year?* In order to answer these questions, it is important to gain an in depth understanding of the related contexts the participants were situated in. Consequently, the causes of the problems and challenges these students said they faced during their transition are explored and discussed in three levels: macro (national),

meso (institutional) and micro (personal). Since the personal level causes have already been discussed, this section focuses mainly on the meso and macro level causes.

A. Macro Level

All macro level, or the national level causes were inferred by the data and were comprised of the following: the special features of articulation agreements, cultural differences between China and Britain, and English language education in China.

The participants believed that the main reason for the lack of adequate institutional-level support was that there was a gap between what the home and UK institutions perceived to be the help Chinese top-up students would need and what these students said they actually needed in order to settle in and function properly in the new environment. This gap might be the result of the way articulation agreements were operated, since the UK institution did not seem to have contributed to the programmes delivered in the Chinese partner institutions, and hence lacked a clear understanding of the participants' learning experiences in China; thus, their learning ability and habits. For the same reason, the Chinese institutions appeared to be unclear about the expectations of the top-up programmes, and the skills that these students needed to cope with the future academic and social challenges while in the UK.

The barriers caused by cultural differences were one of the main difficulties the participants faced, but were also a key reason that hindered the participants from making new British friends and engaging with local communities. For example, social entertainments between both countries are very different. The participants by and large believed that there was a wide variety of entertainment activities to choose from when they were in China, and shops stayed open late. In contrast, they felt that life in Britain was boring, as there was not much to do in the evening apart from going for drinks in the pub, and the shops were closed too early.

There are hardly any entertainments in Britain. Most British like to have a picnic or play golf. But I don't like any of these... There are so many exciting things to do in China, day time and evening. For example, there are many live room escape games. In some games, one can pretend to be a detective to solve a crime. They are all very interesting. (Lisa)

The findings also suggest that the language skills of all participants were very weak when they arrived in Britain initially. The main reason seemed to be that the participants felt that they were not prepared sufficiently before their departure. Apart from the fact that there appeared to be a lack of communication between their home institution and the UK institution, the findings suggest this was also the result of the way English language was taught in China. Due to the impact of the teacher-centred, exam-driven education system, English was taught mainly as a subject, rather than a language.

The training in year one was completely useless. The content was very broad and shallow. It didn't cover anything particularly useful. In my opinion, it should be reduced to one semester only, and with a target focus on

our IELTS test. (Rachel)

The IELTS training we had mainly taught us test skills and how to achieve the score needed. But it provided no help in terms of improving our real language skills. (Jane, IELTS 5.5)

Consequently, the participants did not seem to have developed the key essential language skills required such as the size and depth of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and a basic understanding of the common forms of British slang and idioms.

In the first semester, one of my module tutors had a very strong accent. It was quite hard to understand him. I did record his lectures at the beginning, but have stopped doing it now. This is because I realised that I still couldn't understand him even when I listened to the audio several times. (Daniel).

B. Meso Level

The meso level, or the institutional level causes are: a lack of communication between the partner institutions; a lack of understanding of the previous learning experiences of Chinese top-up students (by the UK institution); a lack of sufficient and appropriate training and support to Chinese top-up students before their departure and after arrival (by both institutions); and the different learning and teaching approaches between both institutions. This section is mainly centred around the latter two causes, as the first two are already discussed in the section above (macro level).

All participants reported that while they were in China, both their home and the UK institutions did not provide adequate training and support to help them develop the essential skills they needed to study in the UK, or sufficient information about the new education system, or their future top-up programme, such as the modules they were going to study. Socially the participants commented that they were offered limited information about British culture and customs.

The agents didn't explain to us what exactly a British degree classification was, and I had no idea about it. We were only told that we should aim to get a 2.1 because it would be easier for us to apply for a master's degree in Britain later on. (Laura)

After they arrived in Britain, the participants felt that the type of support and the level of support that they were offered by the UK institution, for example, through a module called Academic English, did not truly help them develop their language and academic skills needed to cope effectively with the challenges they were facing in this year. They said that even though the intention of this module was good, it was essentially a series of one-hour independent learning sessions with the aid of a tutor, and did not provide any specific scaffolding support, which seemed to be more preferred by the Chinese top-students students.

Most of the time this module was useless... We were asked to do homework instead if we had no questions to ask. However, I didn't have many tasks to work on, especially at the beginning of the semester... I did use the time to pre-read the lecture hand-outs, but the preparation

often took less than an hour. For the rest of the time, I just sat there doing nothing. (Jane)

It is well known that the Chinese education system adopts a teacher-centred approach while the Western education systems adopt a more student-centred approach [25]. This view is supported by the findings of this study. However, the majority of participants indicated that they considered the new approach they were experiencing in this UK institution was very challenging, and also difficult to adjust to. This was because, as these participants commented, there did not seem to be sufficient support at the institutional level to help them transit between the two learning and teaching styles, and they were left alone too soon with too much to attend to.

The findings of this study suggest that there are nonlinear multi-way interrelationships between the factors at the macro, meso and micro levels. For example, the way that English language is taught in China (macro level), as well as a lack of adequate language support at the institutional level (meso level) led to poor language skills of the participants (micro level). Meanwhile, a lack of proper and sufficient understanding of the challenges and issues the Chinese top-up students experienced in Britain (micro level), as described by the participants, strongly affected the way and the level of support the partner institutions provided to these Chinese top-up students (meso level), as well as the reputation of articulation programmes between the higher education sectors in China and the UK (macro level).

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article provides a rich and nuanced picture of how the perceptions of a small group of Chinese top-up students changed when they were transitioning through a year-long top-up programme in a UK institution. The findings of this study contribute to the U curve literature by exploring and analysing the issues situated at the higher levels of the hierarchy (such as institutional and national levels), and their impact on Chinese top-up students' transition. Thereby, this study suggests the following: firstly, the U curve model appears to be deficient, as it emphasises mainly the personal level issues and hence needs to be explored further in future studies by taking account of all contexts sitting at different levels, and their impact on the transition and personal experiences of international students, particularly top-up students. Secondly, additional studies need to be carried out to examine whether the transitional experiences of other international top-up students will match the participants of this study. And finally, it is worth noting that since only the transition of one participant was significantly different from others and did not follow the U curve in the least, more research is needed to explore his transition further in detail. In addition, if similar findings are reported in future research exploring the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students or other international top-up students studying in the UK, this study then raises an important issue: *Should UK institutions take on Chinese or potentially other international top-up students who are clearly incapable of working at the academic level required in a different language?* UK institutions providing top-up programmes may need to look into

this issue very carefully. This is mainly because the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students being researched, as well as the problems and challenges they encountered indicate that this issue had not yet been considered and dealt with properly by this UK institution, and these students evidently needed much more help and support during this one-year study. Accordingly, if any UK institutions are planning to establish new articulation partnerships or to strengthen their existing partnerships with the Chinese institutions, they need to work very closely with their partner institutions, so that they can provide more adequate and appropriate pre-departure and after arrival training support to Chinese top-up students. For example, the UK institutions may observe some teaching sessions delivered in China, and may also be involved in the programme design and revalidation process. Even though this may be considered time consuming and expensive, it is far more beneficial to the partner institutions in both countries, as the Chinese institution will then have a clearer understanding of the UK institution's expectations, and the academic and social skills it requires Chinese top-up students to possess. While, the UK institution will develop a much better awareness of the personal experiences and ability of these students. Furthermore, after Chinese students arrive in Britain, the UK institution may consider to promote and attract more Chinese top-up students to take part in social activities, for instance through the use of WeChat (a Chinese social media platform, which is similar to Facebook). Meanwhile, the receiving UK institution should also consider encouraging Chinese and other international top-up students to come forward and communicate with the institution directly to give their feedback or raise their concerns. This may be achieved by appointing bilingual or multilingual staff to join the Student Services team, so that international students have the opportunity to speak to the staff in their native language.

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